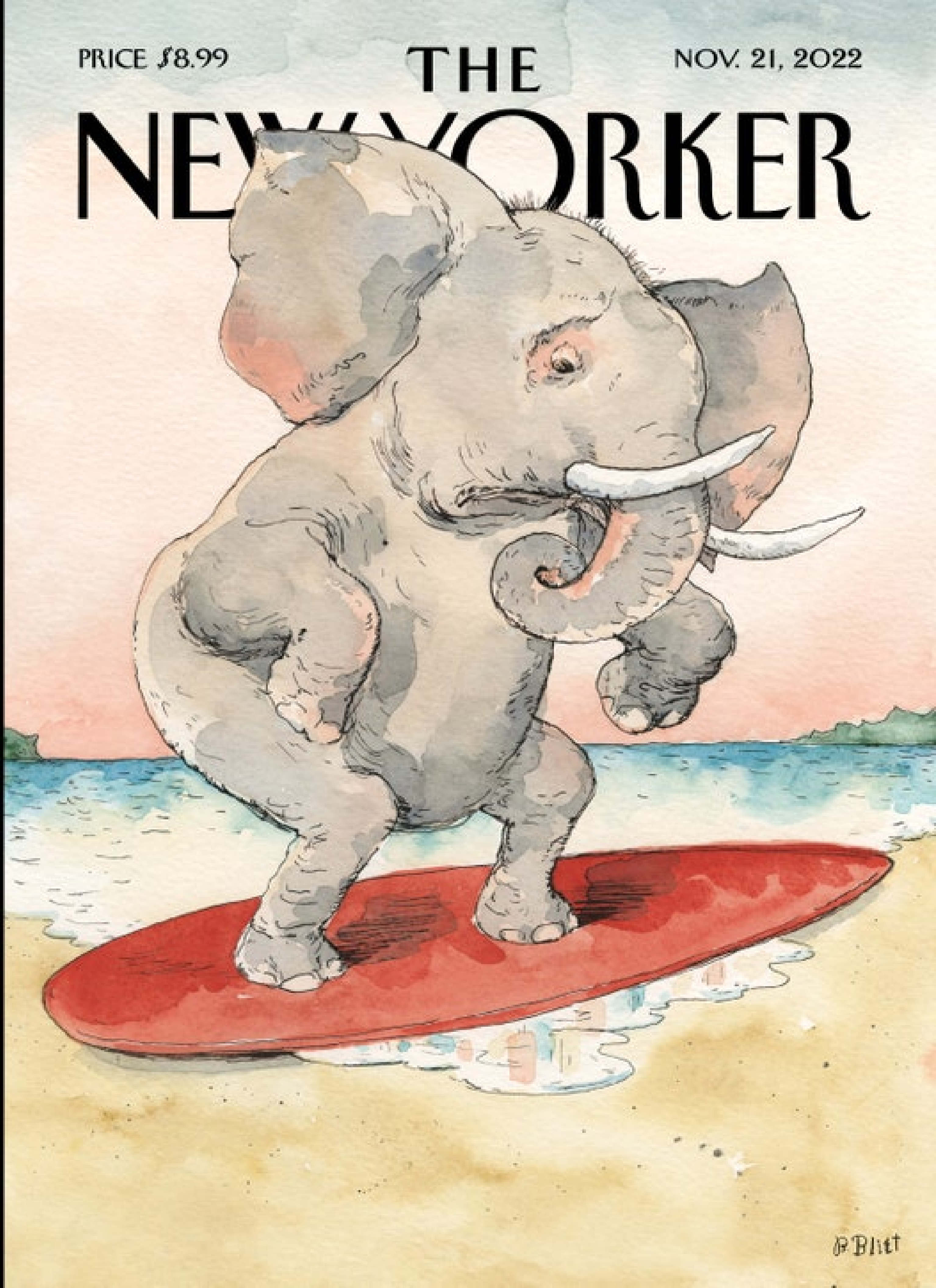
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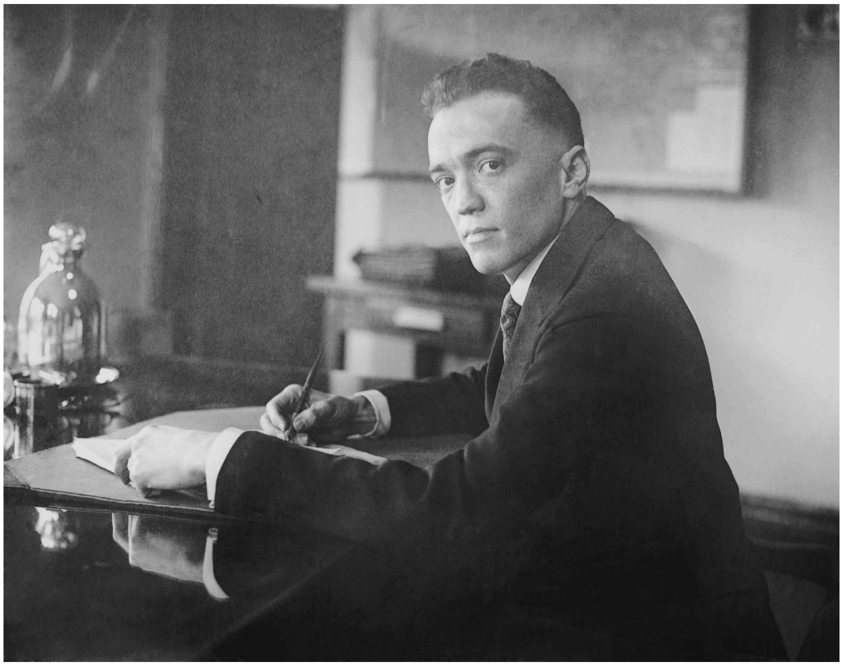
Books

- **J. Edgar Hoover, Public Enemy No. 1**
- **Briefly Noted**

J. Edgar Hoover, Public Enemy No. 1

The F.B.I. director promised to save American democracy from those who would subvert it—while his secret programs subverted it from within.

By Margaret Talbot



One morning in the fall of 1971, President Richard Nixon set out to fire J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the F.B.I., who had ruled over the agency like a potentate since 1924. The two men were longtime friends, united by their political affinities, including a bone-deep antipathy to the American left, Old and New, and a tendency to demonize their critics. Over the years, Nixon and his wife, Pat, had socialized often with Hoover and his companion, Clyde Tolson. They had even vacationed together in the fifties, at a seaside resort in La Jolla, California, owned by a pair of Texas oil tycoons who went out of their way to put their powerful guests at ease. After Nixon lost the 1960 Presidential election, to John F. Kennedy, Hoover was frankly disappointed, and wrote to urge his friend not to give up on politics: "The United States and the Free World need a man of your stature desperately." When Nixon made his comeback, in 1968, Hoover was a distinct asset, an old-school embodiment of law and order for a Presidential campaign that presented itself as the antidote to urban uprisings, campus protests, and street crime.

But by that fall, more than two years into Nixon's Presidency, Hoover had become a liability, the historian Beverly Gage explains in her crisply written, prodigiously researched, and frequently astonishing new biography, "G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century" (Viking). He was seventy-six, and showing his age, napping for hours in his office in the afternoons. He was also showing, in Gage's words, "increasing levels of vitriol and instability," informing the White House, for instance, that the four student demonstrators shot to death by National Guardsmen at Kent State had "invited and got what they deserved." In 1970, for the first time in a career in which he had enjoyed remarkable levels of public approval, half of Americans polled by Gallup said that they thought he should retire. And there was worse to come.

On the night of March 8, 1971, burglars broke into an F.B.I. field office in Media, Pennsylvania, and made off with a cache of top-secret files. The culprits, whose identities would not be revealed for years, were a small band of Quaker-inspired pacifists who suspected that the F.B.I. had infiltrated the antiwar movement and other New Left activities. They were proved right by the documents, which they pored over and then began releasing in tranches to two members of Congress, Senator George McGovern, of South Dakota, and Representative Parren Mitchell, of Maryland, and to three newspapers, the Los Angeles *Times*, the Washington *Post*, and the New York *Times*. (McGovern, Mitchell, and the L.A. *Times* turned the files over to the F.B.I.; the *Post* and, later, the *Times* chose to report on their contents.) Hoover's F.B.I., as the files established, had engineered a clandestine campaign aimed at "disrupting" and "neutralizing" left-wing and civil-rights organizations through the use of informants, smear campaigns, and callous, cunning plots to break up marriages, get people fired, and exacerbate political divisions. One of the files made reference to the name of the project: *COINTELPRO*, which stood for "counterintelligence program." It would take years of digging by journalists, reams of Freedom of Information Act requests, and the dogged work of the Church committee—a congressional body, chaired by the Idaho senator Frank Church, that was formed in 1975 to look into the nation's intelligence activities—to reveal substantially more about the program. Under its auspices, the F.B.I. had wiretapped Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s hotel rooms and recorded his sexual assignations. In 1964, soon after King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, a package containing the tapes arrived at his home. His wife, Coretta Scott King, opened it. Inside was a

letter, concocted by the F.B.I. and purporting to be from a disappointed Black supporter of King's, that called him "a filthy, abnormal animal" while seemingly urging him to kill himself. *COINTELPRO* operatives went on to spread a false rumor that the actress Jean Seberg was pregnant by a member of the Black Panthers. (In fact, she was married and pregnant with her husband's child, but, after the rumor circulated, she gave birth prematurely and lost the baby.) In 1969, *COINTELPRO* operatives collaborated with Chicago police in the raid that killed the twenty-one-year-old Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in his bed. Hoover, Gage notes, approved a bonus for the F.B.I. informant who had drawn a map of Hampton's apartment, including where he slept.

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In the outcry that followed the early revelations about *COINTELPRO*, some members of Congress called for Hoover's resignation. *Life* ran an ominous image of him as a marble bust, with the cover line "Emperor of the F.B.I." Even Nixon's adviser Patrick Buchanan told the President that Hoover should go, before his reputation was picked over "by the jackals of the Left." Amid public criticism, Hoover had—to Nixon's annoyance—become

uncharacteristically cautious on certain fronts. He was less aggressive than Nixon wanted him to be, for instance, in pursuing whoever had leaked the Pentagon Papers. In frustration, Nixon secretly authorized the creation of a team of intelligence operatives who would do whatever, in his view, had to be done. The team came to include a former F.B.I. agent, G. Gordon Liddy, and was code-named the Plumbers.

All that remained was to cut Hoover loose. The trouble was that he had no intention of leaving. He had already finagled an extension of the mandatory federal-government retirement age of seventy. By temperament and by ideology, he was inclined to hold on to his power in perpetuity. The President and his staff spent months scheming about how, exactly, to maneuver him out. They considered various deal sweeteners—including the idea of appointing Hoover to the Supreme Court. Nixon's advisers composed a script for the President to use at a breakfast meeting with Hoover that morning in 1971, in which he would be assured that, if he stepped down, he would leave with "full honors (medal, dinner etc.)." The two men spoke for almost an hour at the White House, Gage tells us. But, in the end, Nixon could not bring himself to recite the script.

In fact, the only commitment that came out of the meeting was a concession from Nixon to increase the F.B.I.'s personnel budget. Nixon, in his memoirs, said that he retreated out of loyalty to a great man and an old friend. But to those in his circle, Gage writes, the President "revealed something more acute: a fear of Hoover's skill at wielding power, and a sense that even the President was no match for the F.B.I. director." Nixon told his aides, "We may have on our hands here a man who will pull down the temple with him, including me." Several more months passed, during which the President was always just about to lower the boom. But when Hoover died—at home, of heart failure, on May 2, 1972—he was still the director of the F.B.I. "That old cocksucker!" Nixon exclaimed when he got the news from his chief of staff. Gage puts that reaction down to equal parts surprise and admiration for the man Nixon used to call his best personal friend in government.

Previous accounts of how Hoover clung to his position for so long have tended to stress his capacity to intimidate, and even blackmail, Presidents. Gage certainly does not deny Hoover's talent and taste for these dark arts, but she wants to emphasize a simpler explanation, one less flattering to

America's self-regard. For a very long time, most Americans admired Hoover. In the nineteen-thirties, the Bureau's white-collar officers acquired a new mystique when, at Franklin Roosevelt's behest, they took on gangsters such as John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd. For the first time since the Bureau's founding, in 1908, agents were allowed to make arrests and carry guns—they shot Dillinger down as he left a movie theatre in Chicago, where he'd been watching a gangster picture. Though initially wary of the press and publicity, Hoover proved adept at turning them to his advantage. The Bureau opened its doors to the public for tours, and coöperated with Hollywood studios on a spate of films and, later, a TV series that glamorized F.B.I. agents and offered tantalizing glimpses of the agency's state-of-the-art forensics. (My father acted in one of these F.B.I. lovefests, a B movie called "Parole Fixer," from 1940. He was treated to a trip to headquarters, including a turn in the basement shooting range, and a highly flattering, personally autographed charcoal portrait of Hoover.) Outside the director's office was a display case that contained an array of confiscated weapons, along with John Dillinger's death mask and bloodstained straw boater.

But Hoover's purview took in far more than crime. By the late nineteen-forties, he had become the country's most reliable anti-Communist warrior, more sober (in all senses of the word) and less erratic than Joseph McCarthy, and in it for the long haul. While husbanding his hoard of secrets, he managed to fashion himself into a sort of avuncular avatar of conservative Americanism. Until the *COINTELPRO* revelations, that persona insured his wide appeal. In interviews with reporters and in speeches before women's clubs and the American Legion, Hoover extolled Christian faith and the importance of Sunday school; inveighed against "sob sisters," defense lawyers, "convict lovers," criminal-justice reformers, and civil-rights "agitators"; and harped on the unrelenting threat of Communism to the American way of life. "The truth is that Hoover stayed in office for so long because many people, from the highest reaches of government, down to the grassroots, wanted him there and supported what he was doing," Gage writes. In 1964, after he gave a press conference in which he denounced King as America's "most notorious liar," fifty per cent of Americans sided with Hoover and just sixteen per cent sided with King. (The rest were undecided.) And, as the Nixon story shows, Hoover's crepuscular hold over Presidents was tenacious. He served under eight of them, four Republicans

and four Democrats, and, Gage makes clear, most were either beholden to him or scared of him, or both.

There have been other big, ambitious biographies of Hoover, but "G-Man" is the first in nearly three decades. One advantage to writing about him now is that, in the realm of national security, revelations burble up over time, files get declassified, *FOIA* requests haul out unexpected specimens in their nets. But some of Gage's freshest takes concern Hoover's upbringing in a respectably middle-class but emotionally beleaguered family, and the formation of his racial attitudes in a college fraternity with a sentimental attachment to the Jim Crow South. Many of the book's other sharp assessments come not from secret documents but from generally available historical sources that the author has read with close attention or particular nuance.

Hoover was born on January 1, 1895, in Washington, D.C., the city in which he would always live. His father, Dickerson Hoover, worked for the federal government, printing maps for the Coast Survey. He and his wife, Annie, had three children before Edgar, the youngest, arrived. One daughter had died of diphtheria at the age of three, during a vacation to Atlantic City, a blow from which the family seems never to have entirely recovered. Edgar was, Gage says, "an ambitious, hard-working child, eager to please his teachers and parents alike." The family was loving, his father gentle and affectionate. He was also, for much of Edgar's life, gripped by severe depression. When Hoover was a teen-ager, Dickerson was institutionalized for a time at a sanitarium in Laurel, Maryland. He died in 1921, at the age of sixty-four; the death certificate listed the causes as "melancholia" and "inanition"—vague diagnoses that hinted at how little effective treatment existed for the mentally ill. It's difficult to know exactly how his father's shadowy condition affected Hoover; there are no extant letters or journals that reveal how he felt about it. But Gage suggests that he was probably ashamed of his father, viewing his depression as weakness. A niece of Hoover's recalled that he seemed angry about it: "He never could tolerate anything that was imperfect."

The Washington that Hoover grew up in had the largest Black population of any city in the U.S., and was becoming more rigidly segregated. He attended an all-white public high school and went on to study law at George

Washington University, an institution that did not admit Black students until 1954. At G.W., in what Gage argues was a portentous step, Hoover joined the Kappa Alpha fraternity. Founded in 1865 in honor of Robert E. Lee, Kappa Alpha was, according to Gage, a bastion of the Lost Cause mythology that glorified the defeated plantation culture of the slaveholding South. As late as the nineteen-fifties, the fraternity's chapters were still holding Confederate dress balls, blackface minstrel shows, and "secession ceremonies." Hoover remained a loyal alum all his life. Kappa Alpha became, Gage reports, his "chief source of sustenance and friendship"—a model for the overwhelmingly male, virtually all-white, sociable but hierarchical and ritual-bound F.B.I. that he built up as its director. Through the fraternity's network, he "gained entree to Washington's political elite," especially circles dominated by Southern members of Congress. Perhaps even more important, Kappa Alpha "solidified the conservative racial outlook he would preserve, with minor variations, for the rest of his life."



"Today's special is puréed sweet potato on cracker."
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

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Hired at the Department of Justice in 1917, Hoover hunkered down and never left. He had held a previous job as a clerk at the Library of Congress, a two-year stint that sparked his zeal for collecting and classifying information. At Justice, he was assigned to the Bureau of Investigation, then

a relatively poky subdepartment known to the public, if it was known at all, for sniffing out violations of the 1910 Mann Act. That changed when Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, began watching political subversives—anarchists, socialists, strike organizers, the occasional mail bomber, and not a few pacifists who grumbled into their liberty cabbage about Wilson or his war. In 1919 and early 1920, Palmer ordered a notorious series of raids, banging on doors to arrest and, when possible, deport suspected radicals to Russia, Eastern Europe, or Italy. Palmer picked the young Hoover to head the new Radical Division, which organized these raids. He took to the work with enthusiasm, meticulously filling the cabinets at headquarters with thousands of index cards on troublemakers across the country.

It was "an unprecedented experiment in peacetime political surveillance" that marked Hoover for life, Gage writes. When he and Palmer were challenged by civil libertarians, a new category that rose up partly in response to the raids, it "brought out an ugly, vindictive side to Hoover's personality—one that had always been there, perhaps, but that had been controlled by a steady diet of praise and success." Now he established a habit that he would retain for the rest of his life, of turning critics into enemies—and investigating them as such. His righteousness, combined with bureaucratic acumen and political savvy, won the admiration of his superiors. In 1924, he became the acting and then the permanent director of what was still called the Bureau of Investigation. There were those who warned that he'd been tainted by the excesses of the Palmer Raids; Felix Frankfurter, the future Supreme Court Justice, was one of them. But Hoover was entrenched and wily, and he struck a modern note—rejecting rough stuff like the third degree for interrogating wrongos, and upholding forensic innovations, such as a national repository of fingerprints. He was what we might now call data-driven.

Was Hoover gay? I would have thought that it was a settled matter by now, but I would have been wrong. In a recent book, "Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington," the journalist James Kirchick writes, "While it's certainly plausible that Hoover was gay and that Tolson was his lover, the only evidence thus far adduced has been circumstantial." In 2011, when Clint Eastwood made a bio-pic about Hoover that suggested he and Tolson were romantically involved, the Washington *Post* ran an article about ex-

F.B.I. agents who angrily denied the notion. It's true that, in the absence of more direct evidence, we can't *know*. But Gage, who handles the question deftly and thoughtfully, will leave most readers with little doubt that Hoover was essentially married to Tolson, a tall, handsome Midwesterner with a G.W. law degree who went to work at the Bureau in March of 1928, and whom the press habitually referred to as Hoover's "right-hand man." Neither of them ever married, or, it appears, had a serious romantic relationship with a woman. After Hoover's mother died, in 1938—he had lived with her in the family home until then—it was bruited about that now, in his mid-forties, he was marriageable at last. Hoover half-heartedly fanned the embers of a convenient rumor that he just might be engaged to Lela Rogers, the age-appropriate, fervently anti-Communist mother of Ginger. In 1939, he gave an interview in which he claimed to have been searching in vain "for an old-fashioned girl," adding that "the girls men take out to make whoopee with are not the girls they want as the mother of their children." Meanwhile, the only person with whom he seems to have enjoyed a documented flirtation, though it was chiefly epistolary, was an F.B.I. agent he had assigned to hunt down Dillinger, a young man named Melvin Purvis. In a correspondence from the thirties that Purvis, not Hoover, saved, the director dwelled admiringly on his agent's swoon-worthy Clark Gable looks; as Purvis's boss, he alternately promoted him and punished him for showboating and other infractions. (After forcing Purvis out of the Bureau, Hoover never spoke to him again; he did not even acknowledge his death, by suicide, in 1960.)

Beginning in the mid-nineteen-thirties, Hoover and Tolson, confirmed bachelors, as my grandparents would say, were almost inseparable. Though they did not live together in Washington, they took a car to work together every morning and lunched every day at a restaurant called Harvey's. They went to New York night clubs, Broadway shows, and the horse races à deux, and vacationed together—Miami in the winter and La Jolla for the entire month of August every year. (Gage offers a close reading of photographs Hoover took in Miami one year, which included tender shots of a shirtless Tolson at play on the beach, and asleep in a deck chair.) Social invitations and holiday greetings from anyone who knew Hoover at all well and wanted to stay on his good side were addressed to them both. When Hoover died, he left the bulk of his estate to Tolson. F.D.R.'s son Elliott later said that his father had heard the rumors about Hoover's homosexuality but didn't care "so long as his abilities were not impaired." It was possible for people to

know the deal and to acknowledge it only tacitly, if at all, and for Tolson and Hoover to hide in plain sight.

What Hoover felt about all this remains elusive—a frustration, surely, for the biographer, and occasionally for the reader. We do know what Hoover did when, for example, he heard gossip about his sexuality or was asked to gather information about the sexuality of people less supremely insulated than he was. If an F.B.I. agent overheard you suggesting that Hoover was gay, you could anticipate an uninvited visit from clean-shaven men in hats, and a conversation in which you were told to shut up or else. Gage describes one such incident, from 1952, in which an employee at a D.C. bakery frequented by G-men told them that a guy he'd met at a party had asked if he'd "heard the director is a queer." The report reached Hoover, who, Gage says, sent agents to the man's house "to threaten and intimidate him into silence."

Moreover, Hoover dutifully played his part in the "lavender scare" of the nineteen-fifties, which targeted homosexuals working in government for exposure and expulsion. (The excuse was that they posed a security risk, since it was thought that they were somehow uniquely vulnerable to blackmail, and that, like Communists, they made up a kind of secret society lodged in the heart of our institutions.) Hoover did not speak publicly about the issue the way he did about the Communist threat. But he obtained from the D.C. police the names of people arrested for "sexual irregularities" and passed them along to the White House. Those who worked for the government in any capacity, from filing clerk to Cabinet secretary, were supposed to be fired—and barred from all future government work. Perhaps he thought that his willing participation in a gay witch hunt would deflect attention from his own private life; perhaps he considered himself and Tolson different from the sexual irregulars the cops were rounding up. In the early nineteen-sixties, when a chapter of the Mattachine Society, a gay-rights organization, started up in Washington, Hoover immediately had its meetings monitored by informants. Some of the merrier men of the Mattachine, for their part, seemed to have got a kick out of sending Hoover invitations to their events. Gage reports on a memo in the files that reads, "This material is disgusting and offensive and it is believed a vigorous objection to the addition of the Director to its mailing list should be made."

Hoover's passion for rooting out subversives in the civil-rights movement, on the other hand, burned bright throughout his career, sustained by the racial ideology he'd assimilated as a young man. For most of his tenure, Hoover resisted hiring Black people as anything other than chauffeurs and greeters. Through a fluke of federal bureaucracy, his hiring practices were not subject to the same civil-service regulations as those of other agencies. He took full advantage of this loophole to recruit preferentially from George Washington and Kappa Alpha well into the nineteen-forties, with predictably homogeneous results. (There were also some weird, pseudo-phrenological specifications: an F.B.I. memo taken in the 1971 burglary proscribed the hiring of men with "pear-shaped heads.")

Under varying degrees of pressure from Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, Hoover's F.B.I. did investigate racially motivated murders in the South. A tipoff to the F.B.I., in fact, finally led investigators to the bodies of three civil-rights workers murdered during the Freedom Summer, in 1964, and buried deep in an earthen dam in rural Mississippi, where they would surely have otherwise remained. In the mid-sixties, the F.B.I. even had a *COINTELPRO* unit dedicated to infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan, and Hoover was frustrated by the intransigence of white Southern juries who wouldn't return guilty verdicts for suspects the F.B.I. had helped track down; for one thing, it made the Bureau look ineffective. But Hoover's heart was just never in the harassment of white supremacists the way it was in the hounding of Black leftists. For the most part, he resisted calls for F.B.I. agents to protect civil-rights demonstrators, and he refused to inform King of credible death threats. Lyndon Johnson had to beg him to make an exception and send a detail to Jackson, Mississippi, to watch over King for a few days in the summer of 1964.

The relationship between L.B.J. and Hoover was a push and pull out of which emerged some assurance, for a time, of King's safety, landmark civil-rights legislation, and more leverage for Hoover. He liked L.B.J. a lot better than he'd liked the Kennedys, and he was willing to do him some favors. In 1964, when Hoover testified about the Bureau, as he did each year, before the House Appropriations Committee, he took the opportunity to go off the record and talk about King's sexual escapades and his ties to former members of the Communist Party. Johnson's aides worried that, once these scurrilous remarks entered the Capitol Hill gossip stream, the civil-rights bill

they were working to pass would be imperilled. Hoover could have said more and said it more openly—no doubt he would have liked to—but doing so would have sabotaged Johnson while bringing the Bureau's secret spying operation to light. He held off. The bill became law in early July. When Johnson signed it, he handed out pens to those who'd helped insure its passage, and one of them went to Hoover, who had done so only by staying quiet. "With Johnson's prodding," Gage writes, "Hoover showed that the F.B.I. was still capable of producing solid and professional work"—tracking down the whereabouts of the three murdered civil-rights workers, for instance.

But Johnson also involved Hoover in a shady side gig, for which he owed the director. L.B.J. feared that he would lose control of the 1964 Democratic Convention, in late August: there were rivals for the nomination, a Black protest delegation from Mississippi challenging the all-white official one, and white Southern Democrats on the rampage. Johnson wanted as smooth an ascension to the top of the ticket as possible, so he asked Hoover to have F.B.I. agents, supplemented by civil-rights-movement informants, keep tabs on the protesters and on anyone else poised to disrupt an all-the-way-with-L.B.J. spectacle. The agents did their job.

At times, Gage argues for Hoover as a tragic figure—a man who started out with a dedication to public service and certain narrow commitments to doing things expertly and aboveboard, but who allowed his idealistic professionalism to wane and his mission to be corrupted. Yet much that she writes about cuts against that interpretation. Hoover may indeed have been dedicated to government work and its possibilities (an orientation that we do not, as Gage says, associate with contemporary conservatism). From the Palmer Raids to *COINTELPRO*, however, he was never able to understand campaigns to expand social or racial or gender equality as anything other than criminal conspiracies, ginned up by foreign agents and their dupes. As a result, Gage concludes, "Hoover did as much as any individual in government to contain and cripple movements seeking social justice, and thus to limit the forms of democracy and governance that might have been possible." That is a devastating assessment.

Hoover's reputation may have suffered, but in one crucial respect he still holds the upper hand. In 2027, the recordings that the Bureau made in

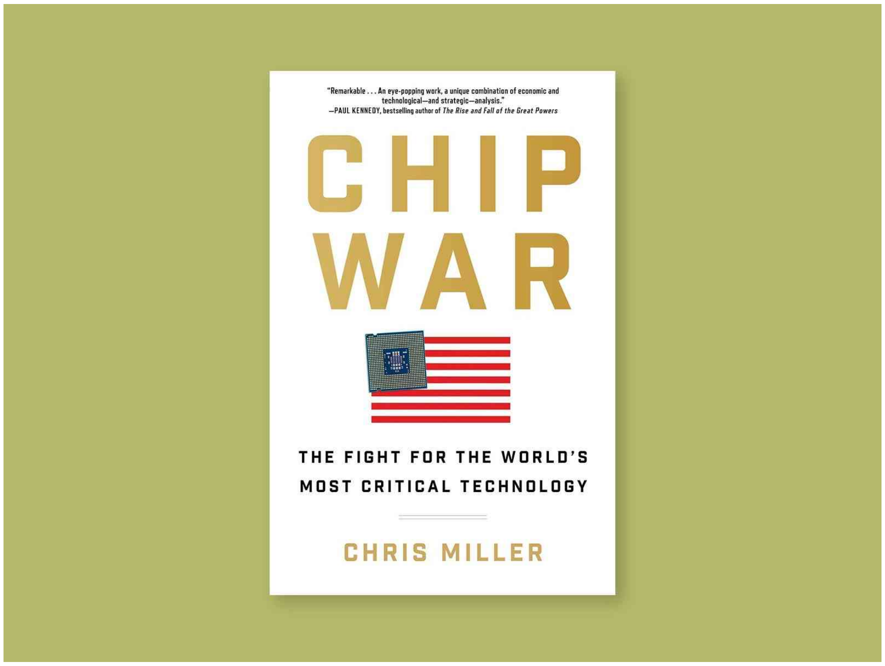
King’s hotel rooms will be released to the public. We’ll all have the chance to listen to and judge them. In Hoover’s office at the time of his own death was a set of files containing letters and other papers that concerned his private life. According to congressional investigators, the files included Bureau documents as well. Hoover had given orders to his long-serving secretary, Helen Gandy, to destroy them when the time came. On the day he died, Gandy began to do so. It took her two months to tear up each paper and then make sure they were all shredded or incinerated. Hoover knew how to keep his own secrets. He is keeping some of them still. ♦

By David Rohde

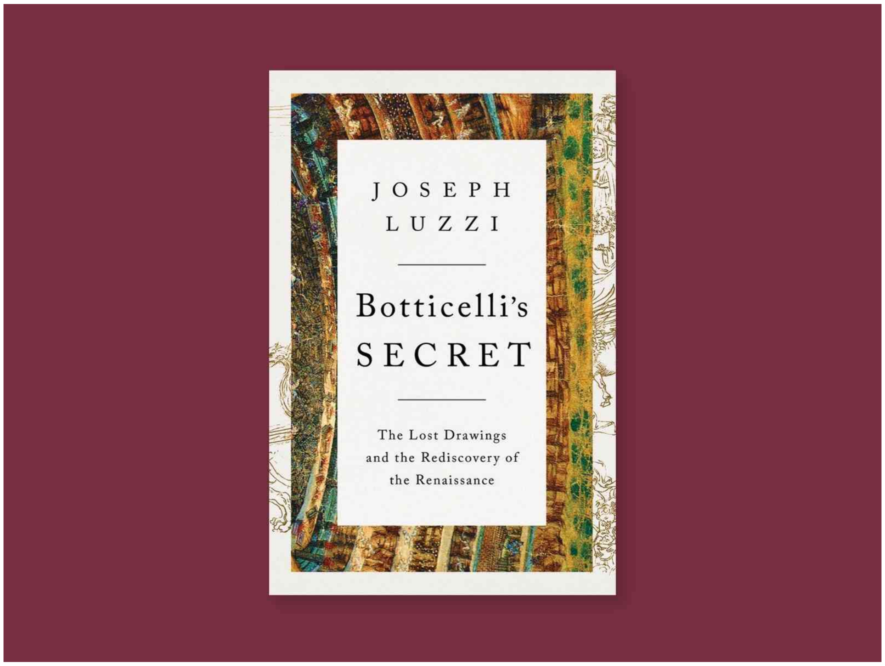
By John Cassidy

By Adam Entous

By Keith Gessen



Chip War, *by Chris Miller (Scribner)*. Silicon chips undergird all of modern digital technology, yet only a handful of companies are capable of producing them or the nanometre-scale precision instruments required for their manufacture—making the industry "a triumph of efficiency," Miller writes, but also creating "a staggering vulnerability." This history traces the chips' development, from their invention, in America, in the nineteen-fifties, to the establishment of a global supply chain concentrated in East Asia. Today, nearly all advanced processor chips are produced in Taiwan, and Miller mounts a convincing argument that shifting control of the industry could dramatically reshape the world's economic and political orders.

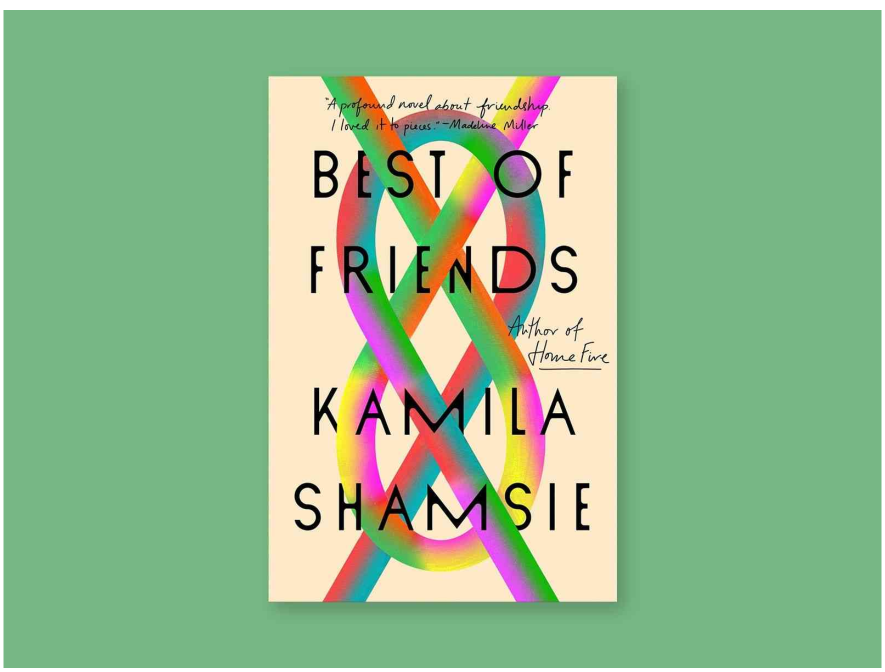


Botticelli's Secret, *by Joseph Luzzi (Norton)*. In 1882, an Austro-Hungarian art collector purchased a set of drawings by Sandro Botticelli that had been languishing in private collections in France and England for centuries. In this wide-ranging history, Luzzi considers why the drawings, which illustrated eighty-eight cantos of Dante's Divine Comedy, had fallen into oblivion, and charts both Dante's and Botticelli's reputations across the ages. Many early critics found Botticelli's drawings out of step with Dante's text, arguing that the Renaissance artist's sensual, full-bodied humans undermined the medieval poet's "visceral yearning for God." Luzzi, by contrast, reads Botticelli's drawings as "a 'poem' in their own regard," and as a crucial link in the "mapping of the human spirit's transition" from one era to the next.

The Best Books of 2022

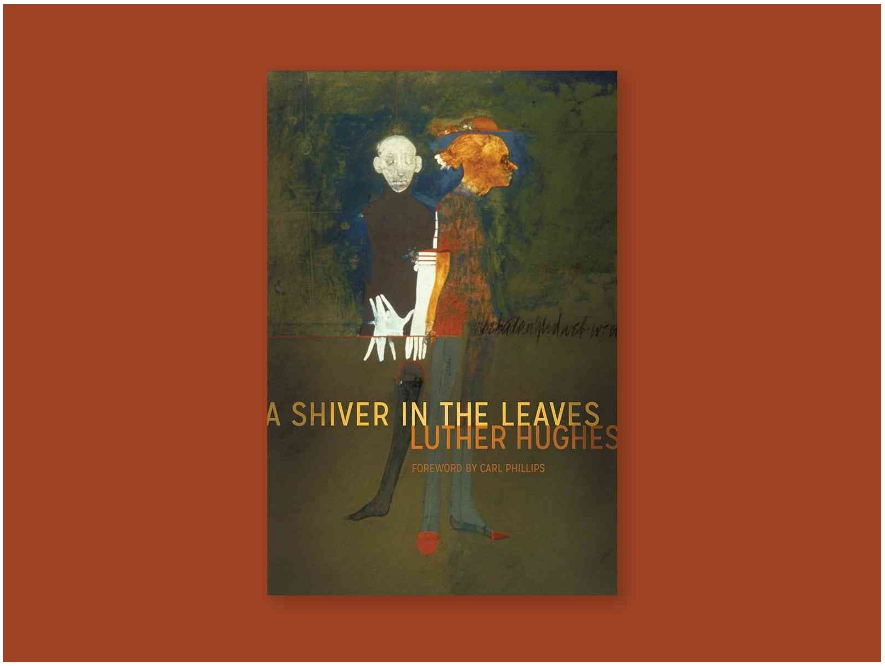


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Best of Friends, *by Kamila Shamsie (Riverhead)*. This novel begins in Karachi, in the nineteen-eighties, where the optimism of two privileged teen-age girls is punctured when they are abducted by a friend's driver, an event that forces them to confront their powerlessness in a world dominated by

men. Their friendship persists, in diminished form, as the novel leaps into present-day London, where the two work on opposite sides of Britain's political divide: one as a venture capitalist and the other as a civil-rights campaigner. The pair's frayed bond is tested when their abductor reappears to seek the latter's help. After a fight, as one of them mulls "the unchanging truth of their friendship through everything the world could throw at them," the other tells her, "A part of me has always hated you."



A Shiver in the Leaves, *by Luther Hughes (BOA Editions)*. Brutality and tenderness intertwine in this collection, which illuminates the inner life of a young gay Black man navigating desire, depression, family, and faith. Although the poems are haunted by historical and contemporary violence, they are also often rapturous, revelling in the pleasures of nature and of the body. Hughes's primary mode is almost Romantic, aware of death's ubiquitous presence, yet alive with feeling; allusions to Dickinson, Emerson, and Poe abound. For all there is to mourn, kinship provides a kind of compass. "I have wanted / nothing / to do with blackness / or laughter / or my life," Hughes writes. "But, about love, / who owns the right, / really?"

By Isaac Chotiner

By Jeannie Suk Gersen

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

Comment

- **The Republicans' Post-Midterm Reckoning with Donald Trump**

The Republicans' Post-Midterm Reckoning with Donald Trump

Will the era of Stop the Steal—and the G.O.P.'s overt challenges to democracy—finally start to recede?

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells



Savvy sportswriters know that the dramas are often richer in the losing team's locker room, but, no matter how crushing the defeat, the shortstop does not usually try to assault the second baseman. One cannot say the same about the post-midterm atmosphere among Republicans. Within hours of the G.O.P.'s dismal failure to produce a "red wave," the knives were out for the Party's presumed leader. "Republicans have followed Donald Trump off the side of a cliff," David Urban, one of the ex-President's former advisers, told the *Times*. On Twitter, Jacqui Heinrich, a White House correspondent for Fox News, quoted a Republican source as saying, "If it wasn't clear before it should be now. We have a Trump problem."

The specific gripe that these Republicans have with Trump is not of a moral or a legal nature. The problem, in their eyes, is that Trump effectively handpicked the candidates who underperformed in some of the country's

most crucial races. Many of these duds had won Trump's favor for only one reason: fealty to a lie. As Chris Christie put it, "The only animating factor [for Trump] in determining an endorsement is 'Do you believe the 2020 election was stolen or don't you?' " This loyalty test led Trump to back a huckster doctor (Mehmet Oz, in Pennsylvania); a foggy ex-football star who supported a nationwide ban on abortion yet allegedly pushed former paramours to have the procedure (Herschel Walker, in Georgia); and a young venture capitalist who proved susceptible to dorm-room musings about the wisdom of the Unabomber (Blake Masters, in Arizona). On the morning after the election, Trump reportedly lashed out at people in his circle who he says advised him to back the likes of Oz—including his wife, Melania. What a guy.

Democrats have been through enough of these cycles to be a little jaded. Republicans are forever stomping around, insisting that they've had enough of Trump's excesses, only to get over it and once again line up behind him. Why should this time be any different? The best reason to think that it will—really, the only reason—is that now there is an alternative. "*DeFuture*" was the enormous headline on the front page of Rupert Murdoch's New York *Post* on Wednesday. It ran, of course, with a photograph of a smiling Ron DeSantis, the resoundingly reëlected governor of Florida. If that headline was too subtle, the *Post* followed it the next day with a front-page cartoon of Trump teetering on the top of a wall: "*Trumpty Dumpty*." From Fox News to Trumpworld itself, the loyalists were fleeing. As the results came in on CBS, Mick Mulvaney, Trump's former chief of staff, said, "DeSantis wins tonight and Trump is not doing very well."

The postmortems are still accumulating, but they already suggest a pattern. The Republicans had no trouble turning out their base. Their struggle was in winning over the independent voters who customarily reject the party in power. And this time around the G.O.P. had enormous advantages, from the high rate of inflation to the low popularity ratings of the sitting President. According to Nate Cohn, of the *Times*, Republican candidates fared poorly in places where abortion rights were on the ballot, and in places where the Party's candidates had backed Trump's challenges to the election. (Democrats also made much of Republican plans to weaken Medicare and Social Security.) The electoral problem was simple: the Republicans were too extreme, and not just on one issue.

DeSantis's ascent on the national scene is a reflection of his political success in Florida: having won the 2018 governor's race by some thirty-three thousand votes, he was reëlected on Tuesday by a margin of more than a million, turning a state nearly as populous as Australia from purple to convincingly red. He made significant gains among Hispanic voters and, perhaps most alarmingly for Democrats, won Miami-Dade County, traditionally a Democratic stronghold. But it's hard to see what solution he would offer to the extremism problem. DeSantis, like the ex-President, is a steadfast culture warrior—and he shares Trump's willingness to use cruelty as a political weapon. It was DeSantis, after all, who tricked migrants in Texas into boarding a plane and being sent off to Martha's Vineyard. The seeming shift in enthusiasm from the former President to DeSantis suggests that many Republicans intend to replace one cult of personality with another, to move away from Trump, and his particular fixations, without altering the nature of Trumpism.

That is a cynical kind of choice. But in one important way it might also signal some small progress. The glimmer of hope in this election lies in the scattered indications that the era of Stop the Steal, and the Republican Party's overt challenges to democracy, may be receding. Quietly, even the most ostentatious election deniers who lost on Tuesday promptly conceded defeat. DeSantis doesn't much differ from Trump politically, but he has declined to say that the 2020 election was stolen.

You can trace the effects of the midterms on Presidential politics by observing who is acting relaxed and who is anxious. At a press conference on Wednesday, Joe Biden, who turns eighty this month, was positively ebullient. DeSantis merely basked in what he called "a win for the ages." Trump, on the other hand, exhibited a frenzied urgency. Republican officials, including Kevin McCarthy, who seems likely to become the next Speaker of the House, had reportedly talked Trump out of declaring a 2024 Presidential bid on the night before the midterms. Instead, Trump announced an announcement: a major speech that he says he'll make at Mar-a-Lago on November 15th. Later in the week, as Hurricane Nicole threatened Palm Beach County, Trump wrote a post on Truth Social, the platform he founded after he was banned from Twitter, sniping at the Murdoch-owned outlets that seemed to be "all in for Governor Ron DeSanctimonious, an average REPUBLICAN Governor with great Public Relations."

That DeSantis has become a Trump fixation makes sense. One political truism holds that, at any given time, only two people in politics really matter: the President, and whomever the President is arguing with. For more than half a decade, Trump has been one of those two people. Now he has a challenger. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Susan B. Glasser

By Jon Lee Anderson

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Thursday, November 10, 2022**

By Robyn Weintraub

Dept. of Rabble-Rousing

- **Nan Goldin Visits the De-Sacklered Met**

Nan Goldin Visits the De-Sacklered Met

The photographer and former OxyContin addict, who once staged a "die-in" at the Temple of Dendur to protest the Sackler family, visits the scene with Laura Poitras, who directed a documentary about Goldin's crusade.

By [Michael Schulman]



The artist Nan Goldin strode into the Met one recent Wednesday, when the museum was closed to the public. She beelined for the Temple of Dendur, in the sunlit expanse that, until last winter, was known as the Sackler Wing. "What's the new name?" Goldin (red curls, black suit) asked, sounding battle-worn but amused. "Oh, there *is* no new name. The Ex-Sackler Room!" She eyed the sandstone temple, completed around 10 B.C.E. and awarded to the Met in 1967. "Talk about spoils of other societies, right?" she said. "I'm starting to realize that's what all museums are—collections of the spoils of civilization. But I still love them."

The reason that the wing is temporarily nameless is Goldin, who is known for her louche countercultural photography. In 2014, she had wrist surgery

and was prescribed OxyContin; she developed a three-year addiction, during which she had a near-fatal overdose of fentanyl. In recovery, she read up on the drug that had unraveled her and on the family that had amassed a fortune from it—the Sacklers, who own Purdue Pharma, and whose name Goldin recognized from museum walls. She started a group called *PAIN* (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) to hold the Sacklers accountable. "My first motivation was to shame them, to ruin their reputation among their peers," she said.

Goldin's rebirth as an opioid activist is the subject of the new documentary "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," directed by Laura Poitras, who joined Goldin at the Met. The film, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, opens with footage from March 10, 2018, the day that Goldin led some thirty activists into the Sackler Wing, where they chanted ("Sacklers lie, thousands die!"), threw fake prescription bottles into the reflecting pool, and staged a die-in. "The Met is my favorite museum in New York, and this is the jewel of the Sacklers, so it was obvious that we should start here," Goldin said. At the die-in, she recalled with a throaty laugh, "a little boy came up to his father and said, 'Can I die, too?' "

Goldin sat on a stone wall outside the temple with her feet up, as though the place were her rec room. Poitras, in a red blouse and knee-high boots, sat upright, as if at a job interview. "Something that was on my deep, deep wish list for the film was, you know, presumably they held on to the surveillance footage of that day," Poitras said. "We never got it." Surveillance is a running theme for Poitras, whose previous subjects include Edward Snowden ("Citizenfour") and Julian Assange ("Risk"). The two women met in 2014, when Poitras screened "Citizenfour" at a film festival in Portugal and Goldin was on the jury. They reconnected years later, when Goldin was well into her anti-Sackler campaign and turning it into a documentary. "I volunteered," Poitras said.

"I thought, Laura Poitras! I'm not important enough. I don't have any, like, state secrets," Goldin said. Soon afterward, Goldin and another *PAIN* member were followed by a mysterious man in a car. "So then she *really* wanted to do it—surveillance!" Goldin recalled. (Purdue has denied hiring an investigator to monitor Goldin.) Before a die-in at the Guggenheim, which has since removed the Sackler name from its education center, Goldin

had lunch at the Frick. “The guards got really nervous,” she recalled. “I think museums were on the lookout for us.” In 2019, she refused to participate in an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London unless it stopped taking Sackler money; the museum dropped a million-pound donation. “Then things started to roll,” she said. “More and more museums stopped taking the money. But we still wanted them to take down the name, and that took a lot longer.”

One day last December, Goldin got a tipoff that the Met was finally scrubbing the Sackler name. “We screamed,” she recalled. She and Poitras rushed to the museum: the lettering on the glass doorway to the temple was already gone, with just a smudge left. (Not getting to shoot the removal, Poitras admitted, was “a heartbreak.”) All in all, the Met erased the name from seven spaces.

Goldin and Poitras took an elevator up to the Asian Art collection, where a gallery named for Arthur M. Sackler, who died in 1987, still remains. “The family claims he’s innocent, because he died before OxyContin,” Goldin said. But Arthur pioneered a system of marketing Valium to doctors which encouraged them to prescribe it even to those without psychiatric symptoms, all while burnishing his reputation through philanthropy and art collection. “It’s a mistake,” Goldin lamented, peering up at the gold inscription. Otherwise, her trip through the Met was a victory lap. “I don’t know who I’m going to go after now, but I feel like I’ve got the power,” she said. In the meantime, “I’ve been engrossed by my own work. Huge retrospective of my life, called ‘This Will Not End Well.’ ” ♦

By Rebecca Mead

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

By Rachel Aviv

By Jessica Winter

Fiction

- **“Hinges”**

Hinges

By Graham Swift



One morning in April, their father, Ted Holroyd, suddenly died and a few days afterward Annie and her older brother, Ian, both still a little dazed, went to see the minister who, as Annie put it, was going to "do" their father's funeral. There was surely some better word than "do," but Annie couldn't, for the moment, think of it.

"Conduct," Ian suggested in his big-brotherly way, though with a touch of tongue-in-cheek. Would that make him a conductor, then, Annie thought, not a minister? And she imagined this man they were about to meet turning up at the funeral with a baton or with one of those strap-on machines with which bus conductors used to issue tickets.

Both ideas strangely pleased her, though she didn't share them with Ian. Sitting beside him while he drove, she reached out and touched his shoulder, just a light scuffing with her knuckles. Ian almost flinched.

For Annie, one of the effects of losing her father was that she also lost words. They suddenly went missing. Even the words that did present

themselves could seem odd and unreliable. “Minister,” for example, was an odd word.

Graham Swift on what death does to words.

Their meeting with the minister was itself about words, since the main purpose of it was to tell the minister things about their father so that the minister, in his address at the funeral, could, in turn, say things about him. This, they both felt, was essentially, as Ian had put it, a “scam.” The minister had never known their father, and they now had to prime this man, whom they themselves didn’t know, so that he could speak about their father as if he’d been a bosom pal. So a better word than “minister,” Annie thought, might be “impostor.” Obviously, it was *not* a better word. This thing, the funeral of their father, would be a pretense. Yet they had to pretend that it wasn’t a pretense. Was there a word for that?

In any case, their meeting with the minister posed a basic difficulty: *what* to tell him about their father? They were already coping with the greatest of difficulties: their father had died. And this difficulty had confronted them with an equally great difficulty, which they hadn’t exactly discussed with each other: the fact—of which they had never been so sharply aware—that they themselves would die, that they themselves were mortal. That they were, as it were, “next,” and one day their own children might go to a minister, in just this way, with a similar purpose, and find themselves in similar perplexity.

In the car, she’d reached out and touched Ian’s shoulder in the lightest way, yet it had caused his own light touch, on the steering wheel—she’d seen it—to tighten. She’d felt the tensed and tingling Ian inside Ian. If it had been the other way round, he would have felt the Annie inside her. She had only gently brushed him with her knuckles, but it had been like touching something invisibly “live.” A conductor.

She was forty-nine; Ian was fifty-one. They both had families. She was Annie Stevens. She hadn’t minded, twenty years ago, changing her name. But now, perhaps, it occurred to her, she should think of herself as Annie Holroyd again, and she even felt a slight sense of having committed a twenty-year treachery. Her dead father was the man who’d “given her

away." What a ridiculous expression. She'd clutched his arm and he'd . . . conducted her up the aisle.

Ian didn't have her difficulty, or theoretical treachery. He was Ian Holroyd and always had been. He had other difficulties—and they were word difficulties, too. He had decided to deliver the eulogy. Firstborn and son—so who else? "Eulogy" was another worrying bit of vocabulary. Ian preferred to call it his "few words." But what to say? Especially as the minister would be saying something, too.

Poor Ian. And then she'd suddenly declared that she would read a poem. She didn't have to do anything. She could just sit in the front row, if she wanted, a mere spectator, with her mother. But she felt that she should be part of this thing, do her bit. And, if both Ian and the minister would be "speaking," what did that leave?

Ian had no doubt thought, Annie? A *poem*? And might even have thought, She's not going to read some poem of her *own*, is she? Some poem she's specially *written*?

Definitely not. What an idea. Just a poem. People often read poems at funerals. So she'd committed herself.

"O.K., Annie," Ian had said in the rather clipped way he could sometimes say O.K. "What poem?"

"I'll think about that."

Their mother, who was present, had said, all too quickly, "Oh, that'll be nice, Annie, a nice poem."

Ian had perhaps also been thinking, Well, it's all right for Annie, just reading a poem written by someone else, not having to say anything of her own.

Their mother had decided not to come with them to meet the minister. Her decision hadn't entirely surprised Annie and Ian. Since their father's death, their mother's basic stance had been to disclaim any active involvement in the situation, as if this thing weren't happening to her, or weren't happening at all, and her position, unhelpful as it was, had to be somehow respected. It

was a sort of prerogative. Annie had even begun to think—though she didn't tell Ian this—that there was something to be said for it. It had its own odd integrity.

Almost at the last moment, their mother had said, as if some more interesting opportunity had come up, "No, I don't think I'll go with you. I'll leave it all up to you, chicks."

It was clear that there would be no further debate. This was their mother. Her husband had died, and leaving it up to everyone else was her fallback.

There was a pause. Ian had taken a breath and said, "O.K., Mum."

But Annie and Ian had looked at each other. When was the last time they'd been called "chicks"? Most of forty years ago. In Kirby Street.

One way or the other, before meeting the minister they'd not been disposed to like him. Annie had seen that this was unfair. The poor man would only be doing his job and no one else would be "doing" their father. So she'd said to Ian, "Let's be nice to him."

Yet, from the start, she *hadn't* liked him, and being nice to him wasn't so easy. Liking or disliking people was a complicated thing. His name was Shepherd. Well. "Call me Tim," he said. He had thin sandy hair, hazy blue eyes, and an apparently ineradicable smile. He spoke with a voice that was patient, kindly, and persuasive. What was not to like about him? But she didn't like him.

Hardly had she entered his presence than Annie found herself thinking of Betty Sykes, the mother of her school friend Sally Sykes, and a neighbor of theirs in Kirby Street in the days when she and Ian had been their mother's "chicks." Betty Sykes! Betty Sykes could spend a great deal of her time, arms firmly folded before her, in her front doorway, leaning on the frame, eying the street up and down, ready to give lip. Hers was the doorway to No. 33, across the road and along a bit.

Betty Sykes didn't give a cuss what came out of her mouth—and much of it was cusses—or who listened. As a small girl, Annie had often listened, and,

against all the evidence, she had *liked* Betty Sykes. She'd even felt, with a child's strange instinct, that Betty Sykes was a good woman with a warm heart inside her. She possessed some vital spark. Betty Sykes had always had, at any rate, a smile for her, little Annie at No. 12.

Then it also came back to Annie, in front of this smiling minister, that her father, Ted Holroyd, now dead, had once said to her mother, Mary Holroyd, after the two of them had been talking, and perhaps not kindly, about Betty Sykes, "Aye, but all the same—'andsome woman." And had instantly regretted (young as she was, she'd noticed it) that those words had come out of his mouth.

Kirby Street. Betty Sykes! Sally Sykes! How it all came back. Now here she was meeting this impeccably benign minister and she didn't like him. And she and Ian were here to tell him things about their father.

The minister hadn't seemed too troubled by the absence of their mother. He'd told them, in fact, that, quite often, the widow would not feel "up to it," and he'd find himself talking, as now, to sons or daughters, or both. His smile seemed undimmable. It was perfectly all right. And he'd meet her anyway "at the occasion," as he put it. It was strange to hear their mother referred to as "the widow."

The minister had first gone through various practical matters that they would need to know about the funeral. He explained that they would have to put together an Order of Service—the little leaflet that would be handed to everyone to refer to. And to keep, if they wished. There was still time for doing this.

With such things, she and Ian needed only to listen and nod. But when it came to the nub of the matter, their father's life and what was to be said about it, they both found themselves bewildered. They hadn't done much "homework"; they hadn't explored it properly between them. Perhaps they'd thought—foolishly—that they might leave it to their mother. Or perhaps they'd thought that it wouldn't be a problem, it would take care of itself. He was their father, wasn't he? Did they need to do homework in order to talk about their own father? The idea was even distasteful.

Ian, in any case, was concerned that the minister should not use up any "material" that he might need in his eulogy—that there'd be enough "left over" for him to say. But what *was* this material?

The fact was that, when the moment arrived, they didn't really know what to tell the minister. They didn't know what to say about their father, whom they'd known all their lives. They were curiously at a loss. At a loss. Exactly.

Or was it simply that the "material" itself was just—well, rather thin? They hadn't dared say this to each other. Their own father, and his material was thin?

He had lived most of his life in the same Yorkshire town. He had spent most of his working life in the same place: Batley's, as in Batley's Blankets. He had worked in blankets. What could you say? Then he'd retired. Sixty-five and just in time, since Batley's had soon retired, too. Or closed down. Then, with unexpected and almost unseemly speed, Ted and Mary Holroyd had flown south, to where their son and their daughter had flown long before, finding jobs, lives, marriages, and children of their own. Suddenly, there they all were, the Holroyds, living in deepest Surrey.

And then, quite quickly again, it had seemed, Ted and Mary had gone into "sheltered accommodation." Quite snazzy sheltered accommodation, as it happened, largely paid for—but did the minister need to know this?—by her and Ian. And Ted Holroyd had taken up golf. Who would have thought it, Ted Holroyd playing golf? But it was what retired people did. And what was in it for the minister? "He played golf."

Not a good subject, anyway. Since, one morning, in his seventy-sixth year, Ted Holroyd had died of a heart attack at the golf course. No, not actually playing golf, let alone at the eighteenth hole, having completed his best round ever, which would have made a perfect story—and Ian would have wanted to keep it for himself—but still in the car park, pulling out his clubs from the boot of his car.

And that was about it. What more was to be said?

So why did her mind keep rushing back to Kirby Street?

At one point the minister, who'd jotted a few things down in a notebook and said, "I see . . . I see," had asked, with his still patient and now coaxing smile, "I wonder if you could give me—well, a sketch of the man himself."

A sketch? What did that mean? Was their father to be turned into a sketch? Annie, who had been slightly coming round to seeing things from the minister's point of view, now found herself bridling. Even becoming, inside, a bit like Betty Sykes. Folding her arms. I'll give yer bloody sketch!

But the uncomfortable truth was that they struggled to give the minister even a sketch of their own father. Or, to put it another way, what they *could* give him seemed only—sketchy.

And poor Ian. What, indeed, was he going to say, if they couldn't even give the minister enough to be getting on with?

But the minister hadn't seemed too deterred. His default position was undaunted capability. Perhaps he was used to this sort of thing: people coming along to talk to him about their loved ones and then discovering that they had no idea what to say.

He continued to smile.

"And you, Annie, you are going to read a poem. Might I ask—which poem?"

She didn't like his familiar "Annie," or his "might I ask." And she didn't like the question, though she knew that Ian would be as interested as the minister in her reply.

"I haven't chosen yet."

It was a straight answer, but it sounded shifty. The truth was that she didn't have a clue which poem. Which poem went with her father.

"Well," the minister said. "There's still time. I'm sure you'll pick a good one. Nothing too long."

Then the minister paused and for the first time looked a little tentative. His eyes darted between them.

“One last thing I should mention. When people say things—or just read them—they sometimes . . . they sometimes break down. They don’t expect to, but they do. If that should happen—if you find yourself in difficulty—just give me a signal, and I’ll take over. You can leave it to me.”

Break down? What did that mean? And if you were in difficulty, how could you give a signal?

“Though I’m sure,” the minister said, his certainty returning, “you’ll both be fine. It will all be fine.”

Fine? A funeral?

Now the thing itself, the “occasion,” had begun. And, yes, she had chosen a poem. And Ian must have prepared his eulogy, though he hadn’t disclosed what he would say, and she’d felt she shouldn’t press him. His “few words” might be just that. And it had to be hoped that the minister wouldn’t preëmpt any of them.

And now the minister was standing at a lectern, about to give his address, his calm and calming smile directed this way and that, to include them all. But he was leaving a careful pause before he spoke, so that they could settle and adjust. A coffin had been placed before them, like a special exhibit, and it was the minister’s task to shed light on this situation.

Outside, moments ago, in quite cheerful April sunshine, their mother—who could not deny anymore, try as she might, that this thing was happening and that she had a central part in it—had met the minister for the first time. His consoling and unavoidable arm had been extended toward her. This was the man who was going to “do” her husband. Annie felt that the inadequate yet useful word “do” must be rattling in her mother’s head, too.

The minister’s strange white robe had billowed in the breeze. Puddles had gleamed. Car windscreens had shone. There was a vague atmosphere of freshness and merriment, reminiscent of a wedding. Not so far away, a

hearse had waited, discreetly yet visibly, with its cargo of something strewn with flowers, for its moment to creep round and pull up.

Then it was doing just that, and Annie, beside her mother, both of them wearing little black hats, was suddenly not forty-nine years old and standing at the entrance to—what was the right word, a "chapel," a "crematorium"?—but nine years old and standing in a simple doorway with not her mother but her father, the man who was in the hearse, under the flowers, in the coffin.

It was not the middle of a cemetery in Surrey, which on this April morning looked particularly green and spring-cleaned and even brought to mind the inappropriate words "sheltered accommodation," but Kirby Street. No. 12 Kirby Street, to be precise. Nearby, though not quite within view, there was open moorland. Not nice moorland, with heather and glinting rocks, just dirty-brown moorland.

But it was a nice sunny morning, a Saturday, and she was nine years old, perhaps ten, and was waiting with her father, Ted Holroyd, for another kind of vehicle to pull up. A carpenter's van.

Her mother was somewhere inside the house. She seemed uninterested in the arrival of the van. Ian must have been playing Saturday-morning football.

Her father had said, "Don't you worry, Annie, it will all be fine. Joe will put it right, just you see." So the carpenter's name was Joe. And her father seemed to know him.

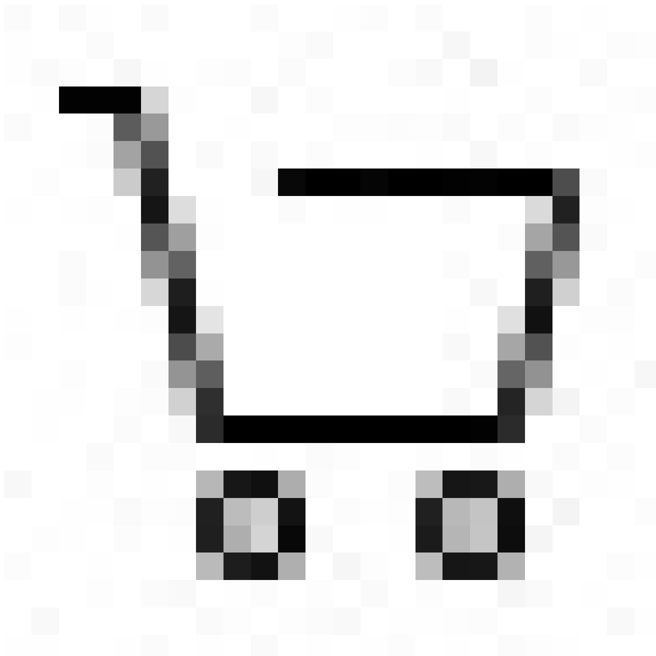


"I want you to know a couple of grapes just rolled under the stove, so you, too, can be burdened with this knowledge."
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

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The front door was open, and the door was the matter at hand. It was painted black and, with its knocker and letter box, was, except for its number “12,” like all the other front doors in the street. But it had recently developed an unfortunate creak, even a groan, like an ailing person, and she, Annie Holroyd, had developed a curious pity for its suffering. This was absurd. It was only a door, an inanimate object, but it was a very important object, the door to their house.

Her father had noted her peculiar anxiety. This was why they were waiting for the man who might bring a cure.

Her father had applied bike oil to a suspect hinge, but this hadn’t silenced the door for more than a day or so. Finally, because its moans were no longer to be endured, or because of his daughter’s strange concern, he had arranged for a carpenter to come. But he’d made his daughter’s concern only more concerning by explaining, as they stood there waiting, that the door must be ninety years old.

“All these houses, Annie, all the houses in Kirby Street, are ninety years old. Just think of that. Queen Victoria were on throne.”

If the door was ninety years old, then no wonder it was groaning. Had she understood, small child as she was, the magnitude of ninety years, or

reflected that the door might be ten times as old as she was? And who was Queen Victoria?

But she surely couldn't have thought, then, what her forty-nine-year-old self could think: that ninety years was the length of a decent human life, though rather longer, as it had proved, than her father's. And she surely couldn't have thought then, as she thought now, that there were two things, generally made of wood, specifically designed to accommodate the dimensions of a single human being. Two objects of carpentry. A door and a coffin. It was like the answer to a riddle.

The hearse had come round and stopped. There was another moment of almost gaiety. Some people took photos of the hearse. It was still possible, somehow, to chat, to make lighthearted remarks. Yet at the same time she was *there*, with her living father, in the doorway of No. 12. It was not a matter of seeing it, as it were, from a distance: she was *there*. Since she was only nine or ten, the doorway, in this case, was able to accommodate two.

They were waiting, rather stupidly, like a reception committee, for a carpenter. And that's just what the carpenter said when he arrived: "What's this, then—reception committee?" She had no idea what those words meant, but they seemed to have caused a grin. Her father had said, "Hello, Joe." On the carpenter's van it said "J. Short." Even though she was only nine or ten, she could put two and two together. He was Joe Short.

As in "life is short." Who had said that? No one. She was thinking it only now, forty years later—it was a grownup thing to say. But perhaps Joe Short had exuded the words in his very being—to be true to, to live up to his name. Life is short, so grab it quick.

He had, at any rate, a way, a quick look about him, a quick smile. He wasn't short—he was as tall as her father. He was a workman and he was here to do a job of work, but a ripple, a current of something that wasn't work, seemed to run through him. He had a look about him. If she'd been a good deal older, she might have said to herself, " 'Andsome man."

Only nine or ten, but she'd fancied him! The first time she'd appreciated a handsome man—other than, of course, her father.

For some reason, she'd clutched her father's hand.

Now, as they all sat, looking at the coffin and waiting for the minister to speak, she took her mother's hand. She sat on her mother's left, Ian on her mother's right. She had resolved in advance that when this thing began she would take her mother's hand—if her mother hadn't already taken hers—but that she wouldn't at this stage give it any particular squeezing. It was for her mother to do any squeezing first.

In fact, her mother's hand felt inert. She had merely picked it up. She couldn't tell if any hand-holding was going on with Ian, on the other side. To know that, she'd have to peer very awkwardly round her mother, who was staring rigidly ahead at the coffin, unaware, so it seemed, that she had a hand.

Her mother's fingers felt weightless and untrained, like a child's. It was as though she, the daughter, were the mother and her mother an infant. But, then again, she herself had become a nine-year-old child, gripping her father's hand. And it was surely more important, in this immediate situation, to have the feeling of holding her father's hand than of holding her mother's.

When she'd taken her mother's hand she, too, had been looking straight ahead at the coffin, so she hadn't "taken" her mother's hand so much as "found" it. That was the expression: she'd found it. She'd found her father's hand in the same way, because she'd been looking at Joe Short. Now she was looking at her father's coffin. It wasn't "her father's coffin," she'd been telling herself. It wasn't an empty box. Her father was in it. Everything was getting very jumbled up.

Now the minister had started to speak. His warm gaze held them all, and he began to talk with authority and confidence about a man he had never known. In the hushed space, his voice rang out and everyone was listening intently, yet none of it rang true. None of it had to do with the man she'd been remembering so vividly as to feel she was with him again, forty years ago. Nothing the minister was saying was actually false or wrong, and it was all based, of course, on what she and Ian had told him—such as they could.

So, you might say, this was all their fault.

It was all going to be a performance, just a performance, a pretense. And, despite her resolution not to, she squeezed her mother's hand, because she felt that her mother must be thinking, too, that it was all just a performance and a pretense and must feel embarrassed and disappointed and dismayed. Even cheated.

How wise her mother had been not to go with them to see the minister, and thus to have as little to do with any of this as possible.

Now the minister was drawing to a conclusion. He hadn't spoken for too long or said too much, which must have been a relief to Ian, but he was finishing on a strong note. Ted Holroyd had been "a family man, a true family man," he was saying. And he was saying it with a beaming expectation of approval, as if he were presenting a prize.

What did it mean: "a family man"? What on earth did it mean? Of course he'd been a family man. He'd had a family. He'd fathered—grandfathered—a family. So had millions. And this wasn't something that she and Ian had suggested: "You could say he was 'a family man.' " It was the minister's own flourish. It was what you said when you couldn't think of anything else, and how many times had this man said it before?

She saw Betty Sykes again, in her doorway. No one ever spoke of "a family woman."

And now she squeezed her mother's hand all the more, because she felt her mother must be doubly embarrassed, worse than embarrassed. Though suppose her mother thought that her hand was being squeezed because of the fine remark the minister had just made?

In any case, her mother's hand didn't squeeze back. It remained like something not even attached to her mother.

"Aye," Joe Short had said. "It's one of the 'inges. But best to replace the whole set. All showing their age. Just like you and me, eh, Ted?"

Clearly, the two men knew each other. Perhaps they'd once been at school together, like her and Sally. Perhaps Joe Short and her father, she thought

now, as she sat beside her mother, had got up to tricks together in their younger days. Perhaps she might have said when she'd gone with Ian to see the minister, "Well, he was quite a one, you know, when he was young, quite the lad, quite a tearaway . . ."

Across the road, the Sykeses, at No. 33, must have seen Joe Short's van arrive and seen that something was going on with the Holroyds' front door.

"But not like you, eh, lass?"

Joe Short's eyes had turned on her, as if she were not just a small incidental bystander but part of the conversation. And what a look. He was past his prime, he'd just said so, but still—by her own recognition—a good-looking man. His sleeves were rolled up and his brown forearms, fleeced with dark hair, looked wholly sure of what they were doing.

The first time she'd been attracted to—excited by—a grownup man.

In the playground the following Monday morning, Sally Sykes had said, or rather chanted, "Joe Short, Joe Short! Never went short! That's what my mammy said!"

Her feet hadn't missed the rhythm of her skipping rope.

Joe Short had said that he'd have to go to Ackerley's to get a new set of hinges. But not before, with those arms, he'd unscrewed the door from its current hinges, held it up for a moment, as if he might have danced with it, then placed it on its side, for better inspection, under the front window.

"Nowt wrong with the wood. Just the 'inges. Ackerley's. Ten minutes. Then I'll have it back up in no time. You could put the kettle on meanwhile."

But her mother hadn't put any kettles on.

"Joe Short, Joe Short! Never got caught! That's what my mammy said!"

And Sally's mother had seemed to know Joe Short quite well.

Off went “J. Short” in his van, leaving the two of them lingering again in the now empty doorway. It was a sort of shock, a violation, the door so suddenly removed—a mere airy gap where it had been—and then placed on its side, like something spurned, against the front wall. The first time, perhaps, in ninety years that it had been so treated.

Her father had looked not a little put out. Was it this sudden desecration? Or was it that he was thinking that, if it was just the hinges, he might have attempted the job himself? How much was this going to come to? And did Joe know what he was on about, anyway? So bloody sure of himself.

Or was it that he’d noticed that she had . . . noticed . . . Joe Short?

For whatever reason—to divert attention?—she’d taken her father’s hand again and said, looking at the object in question, “Poor door.”

“Poor door. Poor *door!* ” Her father had suddenly chuckled. “Oh, aye, Annie, no knocking on it now, is there, no letting us in or out? Poor door, all right.”

Her strange lamenting remark had lifted him from his thoughtfulness. She’d made, it seemed, a sort of joke. But then, as if she were in genuine sorrow for the door, he’d squeezed her hand and said, “Don’t you fret, Annie. Joe’ll have it fixed right enough, just you see.”

His hand had seemed to tingle. She’d squeezed it back, to show that she’d been comforted.

Had he noticed? That she’d noticed. Had he even noticed—though thoughts can’t be seen—the question she’d put to herself in her nine-year-old head? Since the two men were there before her, it was a matter of direct comparison. “Suppose,” she’d asked herself, “I’d had Joe Short for a father?”

And Sally Sykes, in the playground, if she’d been older than her years and not just constantly parroting her mother, might have said, “Well, you nearly might have done.”

She'd stood with her father in the doorway, a breeze blowing in, sun on their faces, looking at the stricken item. Had he always remembered her "Poor door," kept it inside him? Was it with him even now, in his coffin?

Ian had got up and gone to the lectern to deliver his "few words." He still hadn't told her what he was going to say, yet she had an idea, and felt that he'd make a decent job of it.

He would say that the Holroyds were Yorkshire people, though they'd all moved down, some while ago, to the "soft south." And he'd make a sort of joke out of this desertion. That was the thing, on a serious occasion, to make a sort of joke. To ease the tension. But then he'd nonetheless say, turning serious, that Ted Holroyd was a true Holroyd and a true, proud Yorkshireman. Even in the soft south, Ted Holroyd had always remained a staunch supporter of Huddersfield Town. . . .

Or something like that.

And this was more or less what Ian did say and, yes, he made a good job of it. The minister's "family man" had even given him a useful lead-in. And yet —poor Ian—none of his eulogy seemed to ring true, either; it was all just another performance, though a good one. And she knew that she must never let slip to Ian any hint that she'd thought this.

But now it was her turn to go to the lectern. Her brother had said, in an oddly chivalrous way, "And now my sister, Anne, is going to read a poem."

But did she have to? Really? It said so in the Order of Service. It was expected, so she had to. The poem was even printed in its entirety in the Order of Service, which meant that people would have already read it. So did she have to read it again?

There had been a decision to print the whole poem, since it would fill out the little leaflet and make it more like something people might want to keep. On the front was a photo of Ted Holroyd ("Edward Robert Holroyd") in his handsome early twenties. More handsome than Joe Short?

To be truthful, there was nothing special about the poem. It was just a poem that, in the end, because she'd said she'd read a poem, she'd picked from a list: Best Poems to Read at a Funeral. In that playground, long ago, there'd been a saying: true as tripe. Or was it one of those things that Sally's mammy, Betty Sykes, had said?

Where was Betty Sykes now? And where was Sally? Had Sally Sykes grown up to look exactly like her mother? And had she, Annie Stevens, formerly Holroyd, grown up to look exactly like hers?

Was that what people would mainly be thinking as she stood in front of them, reading a poem? Doesn't she look just like her mother?

She got up and walked forward with her folded piece of paper. Did she have to? Didn't she have the right, as the dead man's daughter—his nine-year-old daughter—to change her mind, even at the last moment? And wouldn't doing something on the spur of the moment, because she simply couldn't help it, ring more true?

No, I'm not going to read a poem. You can all read it anyway, on the page in front of you. You probably already have. No, I want to tell you instead about a memory I have of my father, from a long time ago, when I was a small girl. I want to give you—well, a sort of sketch of my father.

She walked toward the lectern. Was this what the minister had meant by "breaking down"? Not being able to carry on. But she hadn't even begun yet. What was the signal for that?

Or: she might read, after all, a different sort of poem. A very short one, though, in its way, a perfect poem. Nothing but rhyme. Not even read it, just say it. She might just say, looking at all their astonished faces, or perhaps—better—looking at the coffin, "Poor door."

She reached the lectern. She took a breath. She unfolded her piece of paper, on which were the same words that were printed in the Order of Service. She smiled bravely, like a small girl called to the front of the class. She cleared her throat, then read the poem that everyone was expecting and would

approve of, saying later to her that it was a lovely poem to have chosen and that she'd read it very well. ♦

By Deborah Treisman

By Peter C. Baker

By Jane Hu

By Eliza Griswold

Grownup Stuff

- **Getting Serious with Interpol**

Getting Serious with Interpol

The rockers Paul Banks and Daniel Kessler meet up at a by-the-piece sushi joint between arena gigs to talk about adult stuff (Banks's impending engagement) over adult food (nodoguro and o-toro).

By Nick Paumgarten



Paul Banks and Daniel Kessler met in Paris twenty-six years ago, on an N.Y.U. summer-abroad program. Back in New York that fall, Kessler invited Banks to join a rock band he was starting, which they eventually named Interpol, and which became one of the biggest groups to emerge from the New York City scene in the early two-thousands. They're still at it—a recording career longer than Elvis Presley's. Banks is the lead singer. Kessler plays guitar. They write most of the material together.

In "Meet Me in the Bathroom," Lizzy Goodman's oral history of the era, Kessler says of Banks, who was just eighteen that summer in Paris, busking out by the Pompidou, "He took himself seriously, and other people took him seriously." Kessler also remembers that Banks was always late to French class. Inevitably, he had "a crazy tale about why."

Banks was late again last month when they met for sushi on Sullivan Street. “What’s up, dude?” he said, sliding into the booth. He apologized and said he’d been on the phone with his girlfriend’s father, and then her mother, to ask for their blessing to marry their daughter.

“Whoa!” Kessler said.

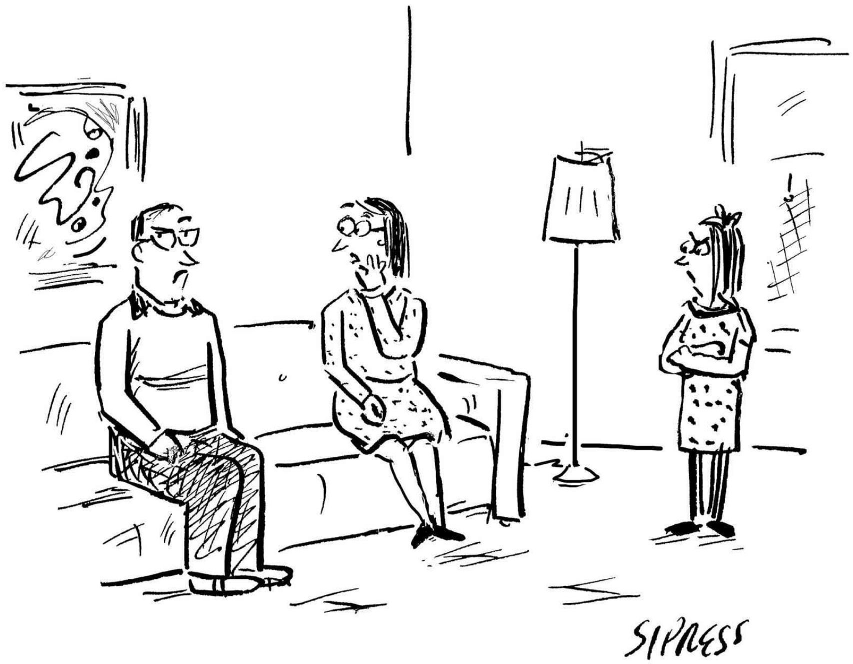
“She comes from a family of strong, strong women, so I couldn’t just call her dad. The patriarchy is present in ways that have become clearer to me because of my girlfriend. Anyway, I was going to pop the question tonight. We’re going to dinner at Per Se. But now I’m undecided. The person I got the ring from said, ‘I don’t know if I’d want to be proposed to in a crowded restaurant.’ We’re going up to Storm King on Thursday, so maybe that’s better.”

“Did you check the weather forecast?” Kessler said.

“It’s supposed to be perfect.”

“I feel like there, in that place—plus you get a degree of feeling the moment out while you’re there.”

“Also, we’re expecting,” Banks said. “Five months pregnant.” He and his girlfriend, Juliet Seger, had recently visited the Youth Welfare Office in Berlin, where they live, to get official documentation of his paternity. “It’s just a declaration that ‘this dude is *the* dude.’ Grownup stuff!”

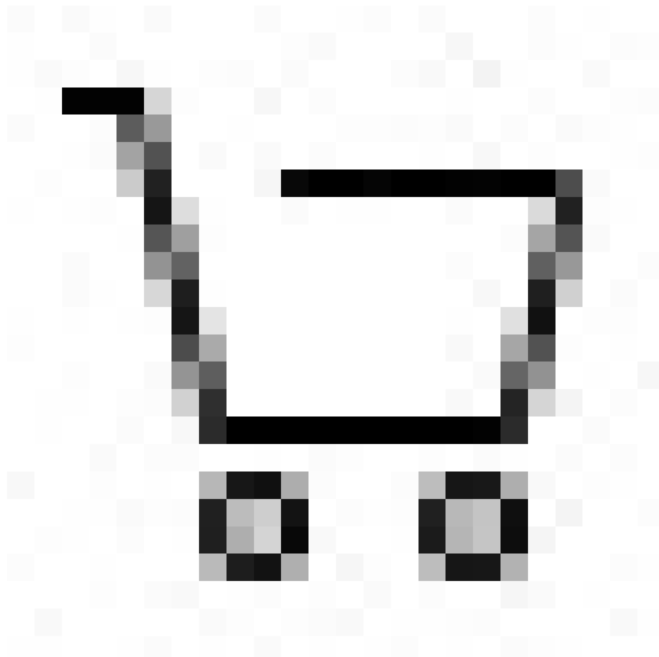


"Remember what we said about letting her find out for herself that she's making a huge mistake she'll regret for the rest of her life."
Cartoon by David Sipress

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Banks and Kessler, who lives mostly in Barcelona, were in town briefly before heading to South America to play arenas and festivals. They each still have an apartment in Manhattan, downtown. They were both sharply dressed in black and knew their way around a by-the-piece. “I will do the sardine as sushi,” Kessler said. “I will do the fluke as sashimi. I will do the *nodoguro* as sushi. I will do the *o-toro* as sushi.”

Kessler has two older brothers: a literary agent in Paris, and a music journalist in London, who has written about his embarrassment, in Interpol’s earliest days, at having a kid brother in an aspiring rock band.

Banks said, “He’d come to a show and not really give you any positive feedback or anything. It was heartbreaking.”

“That was before ‘Bright Lights,’ ” Kessler said, referring to the band’s first album, which converted the brother into a fan. “He’d had a very strong sense of self at an entirely too young age. As kids, the three of us shared a bedroom, and had bunk beds. His wall was covered with magazine cutouts of the Jam, in the way that people might have religious artifacts. I got the idea that music is that important—it’s a savior.”

“My older brother is the world’s largest Phish fan,” Banks said. “I get three messages a week from him about Phish. But I like rock music that takes

itself seriously. I have a problem if the person themself is self-consciously not taking it seriously." (Banks listens mostly to hip-hop.)

The ring Banks had bought was of recycled gold, with a hundred-year-old diamond. He was pretty sure he'd sized it right. "She'd worn a ring on her wedding finger for a couple of days. Nondescript. She left it in the bathroom. So I pressed it into a bar of soap."

A couple of days later, Banks, at the Storm King sculpture park, upstate, got down on one knee and proposed. She said yes.

"The wedding is the issue for me," he said. "I don't want to have to do any of that shit. It's against my personality, the idea that everyone should take time out of their day to celebrate something that has no bearing on their life. Get a tuxedo, get a nice dress, come to this location—for *me*?"

He went on, "I can get onstage and perform. But I can't give a toast at a dinner, or give a speech, or even tell a joke to, like, four people. I have my theories as to why. I don't have to be relatable when I'm onstage. I don't have to crack anybody up, I don't have to have timing that works on some universal plane. It's just me being me. That's how authentic it is. I want to say, it's as real as a child having a tantrum." ♦

By Jay Caspian Kang

By Robert Leighton

By Ali Solomon

By Isaac Chotiner

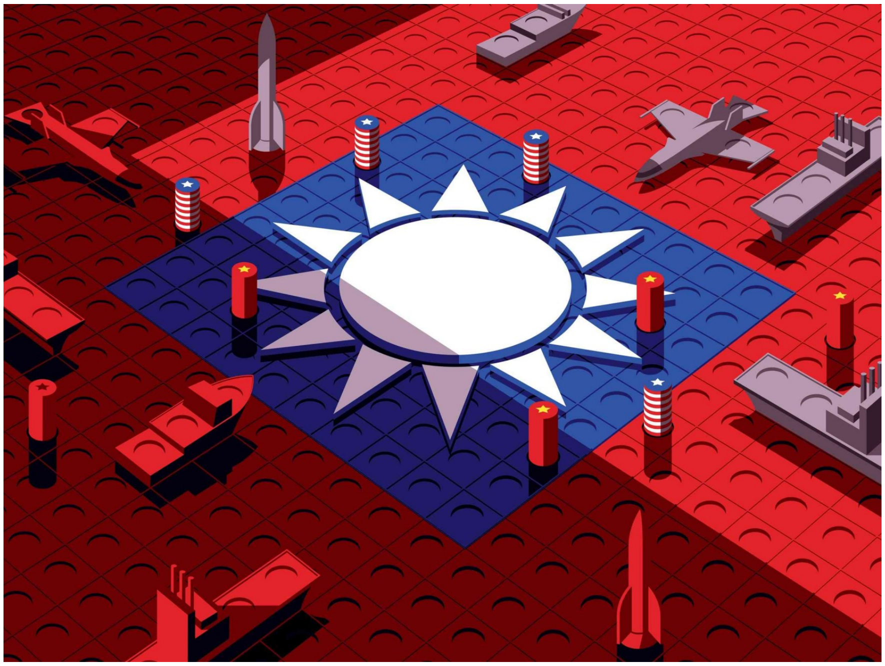
Letter from Taiwan

- **A Dangerous Game Over Taiwan**

A Dangerous Game Over Taiwan

For decades, China has coveted its island neighbor. Is Xi Jinping ready to seize it?

By Dexter Filkins



On Kinmen, an outlying island of Taiwan, the Chinese mainland looms so close that you can hear the construction cranes booming across the water. The island, about twelve miles from end to end, sits across the bay from the bustling mainland city of Xiamen. Whereas Xiamen is a place of gleaming high-rises, Kinmen is dotted with low-slung villages and patches of forest; it is famous for kaoliang, a sweet but fearsomely potent liquor distilled from sorghum.

In the nineteen-forties and fifties, Kinmen was the scene of ferocious assaults by Communist China as it tried to seize control. The invading forces, expecting an easy victory, were met with surprising resistance, from fighters dug in behind rows of steel spikes and in cement bunkers along the beach. Frustrated, the Chinese began bombarding Kinmen, flinging thousands of artillery shells across the water in the hope of forcing its people to surrender. When I visited not long ago, an eighty-year-old resident named

Lin Ma-teng recalled hearing the shells as a young boy: “I used to hide under my bed.”

The shelling continued for decades. One day in 1975, when Lin was serving in a Taiwanese artillery unit, a shell exploded nearby, tearing off a chunk of his right thigh. He spent a year in the hospital and still walks with a limp. During my visit, he showed me rusting artillery shells that he has piled in his hallway—mementos of the long conflict between the fragile island democracy of Taiwan and the behemoth next door, which has never stopped trying to assert dominion. On the beach near Lin’s house, visitors can still see the bunkers and barriers, where people he knew in his youth fought the Chinese. They’re crumbling now. “Maybe the war is coming back,” he told me. “What would the people of Taiwan do? Jump into the ocean and swim?”

This past summer, the fight for Taiwan flared again. On June 13th, Wang Wenbin, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, declared that the People’s Republic had “sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction” over the Taiwan Strait. Under international law, the strait has long been considered an open waterway; Wang was sweeping that away. “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China,” he said. Two weeks later, the People’s Liberation Army announced that it would hold a live-fire exercise seventy miles off the island’s coast. Then, on August 2nd, the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, arrived in Taiwan, making her the highest-ranking American official to visit in twenty-five years. As she greeted officials, an American aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan, loomed offshore.

Soon after Pelosi departed, the P.L.A. test-fired eleven Dongfeng ballistic missiles, which landed in waters around Taiwan; at least four flew over the island itself. Then the P.L.A. initiated a large-scale naval exercise, arraying warships outside Taiwan’s major ports. “The U.S. has made wanton provocations,” Wang said. That same week, Chinese fighter jets undertook flights down the Taiwan Strait, crossing the “median line,” the customary boundary between the two countries; each time, Taiwanese jets scrambled to confront them.

The crisis passed, but it gave some American officials a sense that a confrontation between the two nuclear-armed superpowers was dangerously possible. “It was scary,” a senior Biden Administration official told me. “Not

because we thought the Chinese would invade, but we worried there might be an accident, with unpredictable actors all around."

China's leaders seized the moment to say that they were "normalizing" these kinds of encroachments. In the next two months, Chinese fighter jets crossed the median line more than six hundred times. The flights were "very close and very threatening," Taiwan's foreign minister, Joseph Wu, told me. Although China claimed that the maneuvers were a response to Pelosi's visit, Taiwanese officials said that they had almost certainly been in the works for months.

These moves seemed designed to convince the Taiwanese people that their national existence—which grew out of the chaos of the Chinese Civil War, more than seventy years ago—was coming to an end. Physically, too, the provocations took a toll, wearing down the Taiwanese armed forces. "Whenever the Chinese send their planes up there, we have to go out to meet them," Wu said. "They fly very close, and we have to be careful that we don't fire the first shot in a war."

Yet Taiwan's leaders remained curiously low-key. Tsai Ing-wen, the President, welcomed Pelosi and denounced the Chinese military exercises but otherwise carried on as if little were amiss. When the Chinese test-fired the ballistic missiles, she didn't tell the public that they flew over the island; that became known only after it was announced by Japanese leaders. When a Chinese drone flew into Taiwan's airspace, Tsai's government reacted with similar reserve, announcing the intrusion only after videos appeared online showing soldiers throwing rocks at the drone.

Wu, the foreign minister, told me that Tsai was trying to strike a balance between deterring the People's Republic and exhausting the Taiwanese people by warning them too often. To some Taiwanese, though, her handling of the missile tests amounted to wishful thinking. "When something like this happens and there's no response, the government looks like it doesn't know what it's doing," Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, a former Taiwanese foreign-service officer in the U.S., told me. "The attitude is 'Don't look up.' "

American observers worried that the Taiwanese weren’t addressing their security with sufficient intensity. “Their military is so conventional and conservative,” the senior Administration official told me. If the U.S. intervened in a confrontation, the realities of economics and distance would weigh in China’s favor: China is closer to Taiwan, its industrial capacity far exceeds the United States’, and its willingness to suffer losses would undoubtedly be greater.



“Time of death: 7:31 p.m. Which means we missed ‘Jeopardy!’ for nothing.”
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

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Taiwan’s defeat would dramatically weaken America’s position in the Pacific, where U.S. naval ships guard some of the world’s busiest sea lanes. Taiwan is an anchor in a three-thousand-mile string of archipelagos, known in military parlance as the “first island chain,” that wraps around the Chinese

coast and helps constrain naval vessels heading to open sea. Another senior Biden official told me the Administration is worried that China feels increasingly able to seize the territory it has been coveting for much of the past century. “The Chinese hope that within the next five years or so they will be in a position where we cannot stop them from taking Taiwan,” the official said. “The way they see it, they are building up a sufficient capability to be able to execute an operation, and the tyranny of distance is so great that we wouldn’t be able to stop them.”

When I arrived in Taiwan, I found a place consumed not by the threat of societal extinction but by concerns about *Covid*. Boarding China Airlines, Taiwan’s national carrier, in Los Angeles, I was met by flight attendants in full-body medical suits and plastic visors, who politely chided me every time my mask fell beneath my nose. In Taipei, the capital, I was driven in a “quarantine taxi” to a “quarantine hotel,” where I was escorted to a room and instructed to stay inside. Meals packaged in plastic and Styrofoam were left at my door, and my windows were sealed tight. I emerged four days later into a flourishing city, with high-speed trains, exquisite restaurants, and masked people rushing between appointments, glancing at their phones. Taiwan sits in a climatological region called Typhoon Alley, and soon after my quarantine ended Typhoon Hinnamnor swept the island with wind and rain. No one was fazed.

I’d expected an embattled nation girding for a fight, but Taiwan seemed too caught up in the stresses and entertainments of prosperous modern life to think much about the enemy next door. In everyday conversation, the China question rarely came up. There were few signs of national preparation: military conscription is mandatory for adult men but lasts only four months. The government is considering adopting a policy that would allow it to mobilize its civilian population, but so far has done nothing. According to American and former Taiwanese officials, Taiwan’s defense posture is guided by a strategy that was devised in the nineteen-eighties, when the Chinese military was weak.

One day, I sat with Liao Chung Lun, a twenty-four-year-old graduate of National Chung Hsing University, where he studied environmental engineering. Liao had just completed his mandatory military training, which he described as something similar to summer camp. During the first month,

he said, he and other recruits did pushups, a bit of running, and rudimentary combat drills, like thrusting a bayonet. A handful of times, he fired a gun. Liao told me that the course wasn't especially rigorous. "Nobody fails out," he said. His main jobs included collecting the day's dirty laundry and pulling weeds. "They have really high standards for cleanliness."

Like most of the young people I talked to, Liao said that he felt thoroughly Taiwanese and had almost no connection to China. But, when I asked him if he was worried about Taiwan's future, he shrugged. "We've been hearing this for years—that the Chinese are going to invade," he said. For much of Liao's generation, the fear of invasion has simply lasted too long to feel urgent; like the typhoons, it has faded to background noise.

The struggle for Taiwan dates to 1895, when troops from the Japanese Empire wrested control of the island from China. After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, sovereignty over Taiwan returned to China, but it would soon be contested again. The Republic of China was then embroiled in a civil war, which pitted government troops loyal to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek against Communist insurgents led by Mao Zedong. In 1949, Mao won, and the People's Republic of China was created. Chiang and his allies fled to Taiwan and a handful of other islands, declaring themselves the true representatives of the Chinese republic and vowing to keep up the fight.

In January, 1950, Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman's Secretary of State, drew a "defensive perimeter," committing the U.S. to protect a huge part of East Asia against Communist aggression. He left South Korea and Taiwan outside of it; Truman, like others, expected Taiwan to fall before long. But, six months later, North Korean troops invaded South Korea, with help from the Soviets, sparking fears of a wider war. Truman ordered an aircraft-carrier battle group into the strait, and in 1954 the U.S. signed a defense treaty with Taiwan, placing troops and even, for a time, nuclear weapons there.

Chiang had brought with him more than a million mainland Chinese to an island with a population of six million; his political movement, the Kuomintang, dominated Taiwan for more than forty years. An austere and unforgiving autocrat, Chiang declared martial law and repressed dissent. During one savage period, known as the White Terror, some twenty-five

thousand civilians were killed and tens of thousands imprisoned. There were no free elections, no free press, and no political parties other than the K.M.T.

For years, Chiang fostered the idea that his was the legitimate government of China, even though it exercised no control over the mainland. The state of war with the mainland was constant; sometimes the two sides shelled each other across the strait. With the world divided by the Cold War, Western governments propped up the notion that Taiwan was the true China. For thirty years, the U.S. maintained diplomatic relations with the Republic of China and not the People's Republic, and until 1971 Taiwan occupied China's permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. In office, Chiang nurtured the dream that his forces would return to the mainland and overthrow the Communists. Taiwanese children born on the island were taught to believe that they were Chinese, regardless of their origins, and that their true homeland lay across the water.

Among the first generation of children who navigated the puzzle of Taiwanese identity was Lung Ying-tai, who grew up to be, through her books and journalism, a crucial advocate for democracy on the island. I met her in Dulan, a vast stretch of forested mountains along the southeastern coast. The area is home to the Amis, one of Taiwan's Indigenous groups; according to local tradition, the mountains are inhabited by a benevolent god named Malatao. Lung's house sits on a hillside overlooking Green Island, where political prisoners were held during the years of Chiang Kai-shek.

Lung was born in southern Taiwan in 1952, to parents who had fled Hunan Province during the civil war. Her father, a member of the K.M.T., became a provincial police officer. In school, she was taught the history and culture of mainland China but little about the island itself; the instruction was in Mandarin, rather than in the Taiwanese dialect.

Lung's connections to the mainland were not abstract: her parents had left a one-year-old son behind with relatives, fearing that he wouldn't survive the chaos of the exodus. "My mom thought they would be able to go back to get him," she told me. Taiwan's laws prohibited any travel across the strait; even exchanging letters could bring a death sentence. As a result, Lung heard only whispers of a brother she'd never met. "I didn't even know if he was still alive," she said.

Chiang died in 1975. That year, Lung travelled to the U.S. to study at Bowling Green State University, and she went on to Kansas State University for a Ph.D. in literature. Freed from restrictions on communicating with the mainland, she wrote a letter to her brother; because she did not know where he lived, she scrawled on the envelope his name, Ying-yang, the county where her family had resided, and "the Lungs' village." She figured that it would never reach him, but three months later a reply arrived. "It was like a miracle," she said. "My brother didn't even know he had brothers and sisters."

From abroad, Lung became celebrated for her writing about the politics and history of Taiwan and China; she focussed on the predations of the K.M.T. and on the upheavals that broke so many families apart. Her books sold best on the mainland, and a column she wrote appeared in newspapers throughout China. In 1985, she published a withering criticism of the K.M.T.'s rule, "The Wild Fire," which was influential in the democratization of the island.

After Chiang's death, Taiwan entered an era of political ambiguity. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and severed them with Taiwan; the last U.S. troops withdrew from the island. Still, a succession of Presidents continued to pledge support, giving an impression, if not a promise, that America would help defend against a Chinese attack. The U.S. sold weapons to Taiwan and allowed its diplomats to keep an office in Washington, D.C., as long as it wasn't called an embassy. Taiwanese leaders performed a delicate balancing act, using their relationship with the U.S. to retain independence while also cultivating economic ties with the mainland.

In 1987, Chiang Kai-shek's son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, lifted martial law and began easing travel restrictions. Lung arranged to bring her parents to Hong Kong, where she met her brother Ying-yang for the first time. "He'd become a thin, dark-skinned, slightly bent peasant, denied education because his father had served in the Republic Army," she said. He spoke a dialect that his family could barely understand.

The next year, the K.M.T. installed Lee Teng-hui, a Cornell-educated economist, as President. Lee moved Taiwan decisively toward democracy

but at the same time presided over an improvement in relations with the People's Republic; Taiwan provided markets for China's products and investment in its economy, which was largely cut off from the West following the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square. Four years into Lee's tenure, unofficial representatives of the two countries met in Hong Kong and reached an understanding—the 1992 Consensus, as it became known—that Taiwan and China were inextricably linked. The K.M.T.'s leaders had given up fantasies of reconquering the mainland; they hoped instead that the two countries, with their shared history and culture, could find a way to coexist until, at some undefined moment in the future, they became one China again.

In 2008, another K.M.T. candidate, Ma Ying-jeou, was elected President on a promise of greater integration. Ma, who trained as a lawyer at Harvard and New York University, told me in his office, "This was my vision—that bringing the two sides closer together would make war impossible."

It would also help Taiwan prosper. At the time, Western economies were grappling with a steep recession, while China, Taiwan's largest trading partner, was growing. In the next six years, Ma negotiated dozens of agreements with the mainland. Airlines began running daily flights across the strait, and thousands of Chinese visited Taiwan for the first time. In 2015, Ma met Xi Jinping, the head of the Chinese Communist Party, in Singapore; it was the first such meeting since the end of the civil war. To avoid any awkwardness in the use of official titles, Ma was referred to as "the leader of Taiwan" and Xi as "the leader of mainland China."

Ma told me that during his time in office Taiwan's birthrate began to rise, after years of decline. "That's how hopeful people were," he said. But the island was restive. Lung said, "As China became more repressive, the Taiwanese people began to feel more and more separate from the mainland." Lung became Ma's minister of culture, and initiated programs for Chinese artists, writers, and filmmakers to come to Taiwan. "I especially supported documentary filmmakers in China because they were so critical of the establishment," she said.

There was also a growing political opposition in Taiwan. In 1986, a group of activists, some of them former political prisoners, had founded the

Democratic Progressive Party (D.P.P.), which called for a stronger Taiwanese identity. With democracy flourishing, and a greater share of the population born on the island, a sense of nationhood had taken hold.

In 2013, Ma announced his most ambitious plan, the Cross-Strait Services Agreement, a measure that would have lowered barriers for Chinese to invest in such things as banks, shopping centers, and construction firms. Lin Fei-fan, a graduate student at National Taiwan University, helped lead a revolt. Lin told me he and his allies feared that the law would open Taiwan to a flood of Chinese money and people. “The feeling was that we were going to be swallowed by the mainland,” he said. “And the deals were being made over our heads—we didn’t ask for them.” The following March, Lin and about two hundred other students occupied the parliament building, vowing to stay until the Agreement was shelved and a mechanism was established to allow for public input. Tens of thousands more joined demonstrations in the streets, and after twenty-four days legislators agreed to put the plan on hold.

The Agreement proved to be the apex of coöperation between the two countries. In 2016, Ma’s party was swept from office by the D.P.P., a movement formed expressly to make Taiwan independent. Tsai Ing-wen, the new President, made Lin the Party’s deputy secretary-general. For Lin, the results confirmed that many other Taiwanese felt the same way that he and his fellow-protesters did: “We don’t want to be part of China.”



"Simon here was just telling me about the fascinating book he's reading about bunnies."
Cartoon by Ward Sutton

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Reserved and cerebral, Tsai Ing-wen seemed an unlikely national leader. Born in 1956, she was one of eleven children. Her father was a member of the Hakka, a historically marginalized group. Her mother doted on her, making her lunches into her college years. Tsai studied law, earning degrees from Cornell and the London School of Economics, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on international trade. As a young official, she attracted attention for her role in negotiating Taiwan's tortuous entry into the World Trade Organization, where it was admitted not as a country but as a "separate customs territory."

Tsai claimed to dislike the spotlight; in her memoir, she described herself as "a person who liked to stick close to the wall when walking down the street." Elsewhere in the book, she wrote of the joys of toiling in obscurity: "This is Tsai Ing-wen, always proving herself in the quietest way." People who know her did not disagree. "She's most at home with her cats and dogs," a friend told me.

As a Presidential candidate, in 2015, Tsai said that she supported the status quo in Taiwan's relationship with China. She passed notes, through Taiwanese academics, to senior leaders in China, telling them that she wanted good relations. In public statements, Chinese officials suggested that

those relations rested on her affirming that Taiwan and China were part of the same country.

The prevailing idea in China was that Taiwan would eventually join the mainland, much as Hong Kong had when it ceased to be a British colony, in 1997—an arrangement known as "one country, two systems," in which a democracy could, at least rhetorically, coexist with a dictatorship. Tsai was faced with a conundrum. Bonnie Glaser, the director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund, who has known Tsai for years, told me that Tsai was under pressure to placate the Chinese but couldn't call Taiwan and China "one country" without splitting her own party. And she knew that Beijing was wary of the D.P.P. "The Chinese had already made up their minds that this woman was pro-independence to the core," Glaser said.

In Tsai's inaugural speech, she declared, "The two governing parties across the strait must set aside the baggage of history." China's leaders swiftly broke off contact. "The mainland and Taiwan belong to the same China," Ma Xiaoguang, China's Taiwan-affairs spokesman, said. "There is no room for ambiguity." Tsai was vilified in official news outlets. A piece published by the Xinhua News Agency blamed her policies on the fact that she is unmarried and lives alone. "As a single female politician, she lacks the emotional encumbrance of love, the constraints of family, or the worries of children," an analyst with the People's Liberation Army wrote. "Her style and strategy in pursuing politics constantly skew toward the emotional, personal, and extreme."

In fact, as a public speaker, Tsai was often dull. But she posted regularly on social media, pressing into crowds and posing for selfies with supporters. As she resisted Chinese pressure, her popularity surged. In 2019, when Xi said that he might use force to compel reunification, Tsai issued a sharp retort, insisting that China "must accept the existence" of Taiwan and acknowledge it as a democratic state. "Taiwan absolutely will not accept 'one country, two systems,' " she said. Admirers began calling her Spicy Taiwanese Girl, borrowing a lyric from a popular song.

A pivotal moment came later that year, when Chinese security forces crushed peaceful protests in Hong Kong. Tsai became even more emphatically opposed to integration. Official contact between her

government and China's dropped to nothing, cross-strait travel and cultural exchanges plummeted, and eventually Tsai allowed American Special Forces to come train Taiwanese soldiers. The details of that program, and of many others the Americans are overseeing to help the Taiwanese strengthen their defenses, are kept quiet. "We probably do more diplomatically and more behind-the-scenes stuff with Taiwan than almost any other place—and we talk very little about it," a senior American official told me.

Although Tsai maintained that she was willing to talk to the Chinese, there seemed to be a growing sense that the time had passed. "The moment we sit down with the Chinese, it's over," Lin told me. "There's only one thing they want to talk about."

During Tsai's tenure, Chinese diplomats have worked to deepen Taiwan's isolation. One by one, Chinese diplomats have persuaded Taiwan's diplomatic partners to abandon her; the latest, in 2021, was the government of Nicaragua, which had maintained relations with the Republic of China for most of the past century. The senior American official said that the Nicaraguan government could expect to be rewarded with generous Chinese aid. "It's very transactional," Glaser told me. Only fourteen countries now have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, many of them island nations like Tuvalu. Under Chinese pressure, Taiwan has been excluded from the United Nations General Assembly and from formal membership in most international institutions, including the World Health Organization.

The result has been an uncomfortable paradox: even as Taiwan has developed a sense of nationhood, much of the rest of the world has pulled away. Earlier this year, President Biden dispatched a group of prominent former officials to reassure Tsai and to assess the situation. One of the officials on that trip told me that he was unnerved by what he saw: "What you notice when you're in Taiwan is the profound sense of isolation. They're alone."

In 2015, two Taiwanese university students, Truman Chen and Sandra Ho, attended a journalism conference in Fujian, China. It was the height of Taiwanese and Chinese coöperation, and the students were obliged to sit through a performance of propaganda tunes like "The Embrace of the Motherland Always Welcomes You." "It was so silly, we couldn't stop

laughing," Ho told me. Back in their dorms, she and Chen poked fun at the exercise on WeChat, the social-media platform, and their riffs were a hit.

When they returned home, they kept up their act, imitating the newscasts on CCTV, the state-run Chinese channel. Chen played a straight-faced anchorman, narrating the preposterous reports that appeared onscreen. "Our feeling was that so much of the news was really funny and absurd, and we could tell people what was happening and have fun at the same time," Ho told me.

Their posts grew into a comic newscast, "Eye Central TV," which airs several times a week on YouTube; the most popular episodes get a million views apiece. Chen and Ho often taunt Taiwanese politicians, especially for their historic obsession with returning to liberate the mainland; China is referred to as the "occupied area," with maps of Taiwan's territory altered to include everything from Fujian to Mongolia. But the absurdities of the People's Republic supply most of the material. Xi Jinping is referred to as Winnie-the-Pooh and the government as the Red Bandit. A recent segment took aim at Xi's draconian "zero *Covid*" policy: video clips showed Chinese health workers, wearing rubber gloves and dressed in suits and masks, performing PCR tests on roosters, crayfish, lake trout, even cabbage. Then a clip rolled of a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explaining the policy. Chen referred to him as a "male publicist"—Mandarin slang for a male prostitute.

The creators of "Eye-C TV," like much of its audience, are under the age of thirty-five, and the show is emblematic of Taiwan's generational divide over ties with China. To Chen and Ho, the People's Republic is a slightly crazy neighbor, whose main purpose is to provide fodder for jokes. "We don't feel connected to China, but there is no way for us to say that we are not related to China, because many people's ancestors are immigrants from there," Ho said. Chen added, "None of my friends want to be a part of China. We're different countries."

In polls, the prospect of unification generally garners single-digit support. But many Taiwanese, particularly older ones, believe that President Tsai's refusal to appease China is putting them at risk. "The D.P.P. is painting the

Chinese into a corner," Lung, the writer, told me. "The danger is that they'll conclude they have no options except war."

On paper, the Taiwanese military is overmatched. It has about two hundred thousand active-duty soldiers, sailors, and airmen; the P.L.A. is thought to have more than two million troops. Ian Easton, a research fellow at the Project 2049 Institute, a China-focussed think tank, told me that Taiwan could mobilize as many as four hundred thousand reservists within seventy-two hours. The trouble is that there is little infrastructure to accommodate a large-scale mobilization, and no weapons. "They are very big, but not very good," he said.

Taiwanese leaders have so far refrained from establishing any kind of militia to provide guns and training to civilians who could be deployed in a crisis. And while there has been some discussion of extending the period of mandatory conscription to at least a year, that, too, has failed to materialize. Enacting either of those measures would require a substantial political commitment. "No leader wants to be the bad guy and ask people to sacrifice," Chang Yen-ting, a former deputy commander of the Taiwanese Air Force, said.

As tensions with China have risen, some private citizens have begun acting on their own. One Saturday morning, in the basement of the Chi-Nan Presbyterian Church, in Taipei, I visited a course in first aid and rudimentary civil defense. An instructor showed some sixty concerned civilians how to move a person who has been wounded and how to stanch bleeding; other courses were dedicated to operating two-way radios and preparing to live in community shelters. Several similar groups have formed. One of those who signed up was a woman who asked not to be named, for fear of retribution. She grew up in Taipei, attended college in Hong Kong, and went on to work for a bank there. "When the Chinese came to Hong Kong, they brought in their surveillance cameras and their facial-recognition software," she told me. "That's what they want to do here."

Robert Tsao, a billionaire founder of one of Taiwan's leading semiconductor manufacturers, U.M.C., pledged more than thirty million dollars to lay the groundwork for a territorial-defense program. Tsao was born in Beijing and did business with China as he built his fortune, but, since the crackdown in

Hong Kong, he has begun referring to Chinese leaders as a "gangster mafia." He told me that he envisioned a force of three million women and men; his funding would supply a down payment on housing and firearms training. "I don't care if the government isn't ready," he said. "We have to act."

President Tsai is constrained in part by pockets of pro-unification sympathy—particularly among her rivals in the K.M.T. In August, Andrew Hsia, a K.M.T. leader, travelled to China and met with government officials—one of the first such meetings in years. Hsia was vilified by Tsai's supporters for the meeting, but he told me that his Chinese interlocutors were frustrated that they had no one to talk to in the Taiwanese government. "It's a dangerous situation," he said. "There's no dialogue. That's when accidents happen."

The most powerful constituency for closer ties with China is the business community. Since the nineteen-eighties, Taiwan has invested tens of billions of dollars in China, and thousands of companies have opened operations there. Among them are some of the largest and most successful businesses in the world, including Foxconn, whose factories on the mainland assemble millions of cell phones a year. More than two hundred thousand Taiwanese live in China, many of them working in tech jobs. Taiwan is a net beneficiary of this economic relationship, with a trade surplus of a hundred and four billion dollars last year.

Many businessmen with operations in China are close to the K.M.T. and hold more positive views of China. Sheen Ching-jing was born in China in 1947 and fled to Taiwan with his parents two years later. He returned in the early nineteen-nineties and built the Yangzhou Core Pacific City Development Co. With more than six thousand employees, Sheen's company has constructed apartment complexes, shopping centers, and homes. Sheen told me that good relations with China were essential to Taiwan's prosperity. "This is an era of economics," he said. "We share the same culture. We are of the same tribe. There's no reason for us to be separate countries." The widespread opposition to unification would inevitably fade away, and military force would be unnecessary, Sheen said: "The question will be naturally resolved."

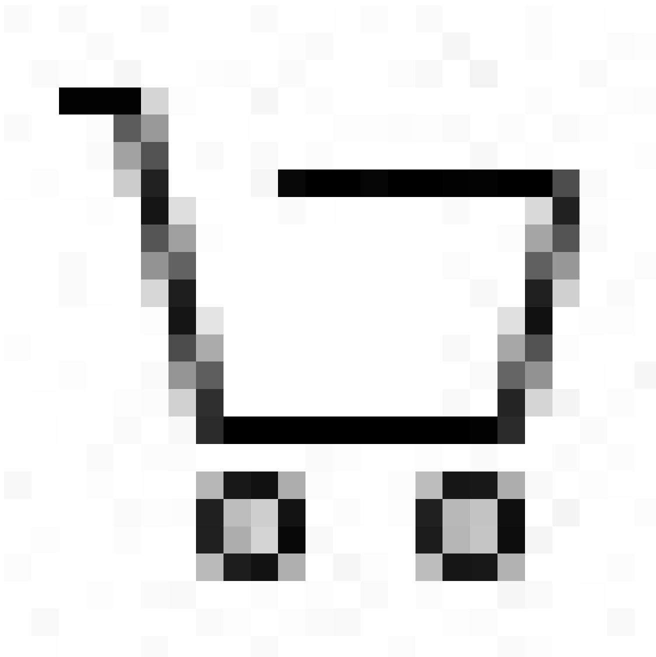


"It's called agriculture. Get used to it."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

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Some Taiwanese businessmen told me privately that Chinese officials had pressured them to avoid political positions that ran counter to China's foreign policy. One businessman, who called himself Winston, said that China favored K.M.T. candidates—and made it clear that supporting the D.P.P. would invite punishment. Winston, who oversees an operation with thousands of employees on the mainland, said a government official approached him after discovering that one of his employees had contributed to a pro-independence Presidential candidate in Taiwan. The official threatened heavy punishment if the donations continued. "It was very sensitive," Winston said.

During the 2020 election campaign, Winston recalled, his company's leaders declined a request from President Tsai to appear with them in Taiwan, for fear of angering the Chinese: "It put us in a very tricky position." He told me that his operations in China were under constant threat of inspections and fines, and that it was sometimes necessary to bribe officials to keep them from causing trouble. "We are dealing with people who are trying to make as much money as possible in the jobs they have, before they are moved out," he said. "It's a very difficult environment."

The K.M.T. says that it is committed to preserving Taiwanese sovereignty. But some of its leaders have grown remarkably close to China. In May,

Hung Hsiu-chu, a former K.M.T. chairwoman, toured Xinjiang, where Western governments have accused the Chinese government of committing genocide against the Uyghur minority and maintaining an archipelago of forced-labor camps. Speaking to Chinese media afterward, Hung dismissed claims of genocide, saying that she saw only “bright smiles on everyone’s faces, full of hope for the future.” She didn’t notice any Uyghurs working against their will, either: “If they are, why do they all show satisfied looks on their faces?”

Suspicions abound that pro-Chinese leaders have quietly accepted money from the mainland. One of them is Zhang Xiuye, a native of Shanghai who married a Taiwanese man and, in 2018, ran for a seat on the Taipei City Council. That October, she and a colleague in the Patriotic Alliance Association, which advocates unification, were charged with accepting sixty-two thousand dollars from a source in China, apparently to help their candidacies. Both denied wrongdoing; Zhang posted bail and disappeared, presumably to the mainland. “We suspect the Chinese are doing a lot of this,” Syu Guan-ze, an independent researcher, told me. “But it’s nearly impossible to track all the money flowing into Taiwan.”

At a conference in Beijing in 2019, a senior member of the Chinese Communist Party exhorted Taiwanese media executives to advance China’s plan for the island. “We want to realize peaceful unification—one country, two systems—and we need to rely on the joint efforts of our friends in the media,” the Chinese leader said, according to a video of the meeting. “I believe you understand the situation. History will remember you.”

Much of the suspicion about Chinese efforts to co-opt the media has fallen on Tsai Eng-meng, a Taiwanese billionaire who built a sprawling conglomerate, called Want Want, of snack-food factories, hotels, and real estate on the mainland. Beginning in the two-thousands, Tsai bought several large Taiwanese media properties, including the *China Times* newspaper and CTi TV, which became known for a sharply pro-China slant. In 2019, it was reported that Want Want had received more than half a billion dollars in subsidies from the Chinese government since 2004; during the most recent Presidential campaign, CTi TV devoted nearly three-quarters of its coverage to the K.M.T. candidate. “It’s an outlet for Chinese propaganda,” K. C. Huang, the head of *TAWPA*, an organization dedicated to fighting corruption,

said. In 2020, the Taiwanese government declined to renew the broadcasting license for the company's news network, after receiving hundreds of complaints from citizens.

Misinformation is ubiquitous on Taiwanese social media. This summer, an audio recording widely suspected of coming from China gave instructions on how to prepare for an impending invasion. "Everyone must stay away from military facilities, sit quietly in their homes, and wait for liberation," a Chinese-accented voice said. "If you have children in the Army, be sure to tell them if the People's Liberation Army attacks Taiwan to hand over their guns and they won't be killed."

In 2013, Chinese construction crews arrived at a shoal in the South China Sea known as Mischief Reef. It was a speck in the ocean—so shallow that at high tide it disappeared below the water—but that didn't last. The Chinese crews began piling sand atop the reef, and eventually poured acres of concrete to build it into an island—attempting to create a new political entity in one of the world's busiest shipping corridors, on the southern approach to Taiwan. Mischief Reef was also claimed by the Philippines, which sued China in the International Court of Arbitration. But the Chinese crews carried on, even firing water cannons at Filipino boats sailing to a nearby reef. Within a few years, they had built a runway and brought in radar and anti-aircraft missiles, along with troops to man them; over time, two more artificial islands were fully militarized.

The construction was part of a long-running effort to claim jurisdiction in the South China Sea, which is rich in fishing beds and oil deposits. For decades, China's government has been declaring that tiny spits of land in the sea are in fact islands, entitled to territorial waters that extend out for miles. The Chinese have made more than two hundred such claims, giving them jurisdiction over international waters and making it increasingly difficult for other nations to operate. In 2016, the International Court of Arbitration ruled that the claims had no validity. The Chinese government ignored the ruling, which the vice foreign minister dismissed as "a scrap of paper."

On September 1, 2021, China declared that any foreign vessel sailing in the territorial waters of the reclaimed reefs and shoals would be required to identify itself. The U.S. refused. As a former senior naval officer told me,

“We made it absolutely clear that we weren’t going to abide by that.” A week later, an American destroyer called the U.S.S. Benfold sailed past Mischief Reef without providing identification. Chinese forces went on high alert, and the People’s Liberation Army declared the ship’s presence “the latest iron-clad proof of attempted U.S. hegemony and militarization of the South China Sea.” The U.S. Navy said that the mission was intended to “demonstrate that the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.”

As China stepped up its claims in the Pacific, Western leaders responded. In September of 2021 alone, the U.S. Navy sent aircraft carriers, destroyers, and other warships into the waters around Taiwan or the South China Sea at least six times; the British, at least twice. The next month, ships from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, New Zealand, and Japan gathered in the Philippine Sea for a sprawling multinational naval exercise, one of the largest since the end of the Cold War.

This year, the U.S. has sent warships into the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea seventeen times and has routinely sent aircraft to patrol there. The naval activity has sometimes been so intense that each side appeared to be reacting to the other. A former senior American naval officer insisted that this wasn’t the case, as the Navy planned each mission weeks in advance. “I think they are reacting to us,” he said. Whenever Americans have appeared, a Chinese vessel or aircraft has invariably come to shadow them.

Occasionally, the encounters have been humorous. In 2015, a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane was patrolling the South China Sea when it received a radio message. “This is the Chinese Navy,” a voice said in heavily accented English. “Please go away quickly in order to wrong judgment.”

An American officer gave a carefully parsed response: “I am a United States military aircraft, conducting lawful military activities outside national airspace.”

The voice over the radio replied, “Meow.” It was followed by a series of mysterious beeps: the sound of Space Invaders, the nineteen-seventies video game.

In 2020, the Chinese military issued a harsher provocation: a propaganda video, in which nuclear-capable H-6K jets carried out simulated missile attacks. In the video, which the P.L.A. titled "The God of War H-6K Goes on the Attack!," the warplanes strike what appears to be Guam, the home of Andersen Air Force Base, one of a handful of major U.S. bases in the Pacific. The ground erupts; a block of waterfront warehouses bursts into a fireball, and then a column of smoke rises toward the planes. American observers responded bluffly to the simulation. "We could have killed them six times," a U.S. military officer told me. Still, China's belligerence reflected how the balance of military power had shifted since the late nineties, when the two countries got into a dispute over Taiwan, and China was forced to give way.

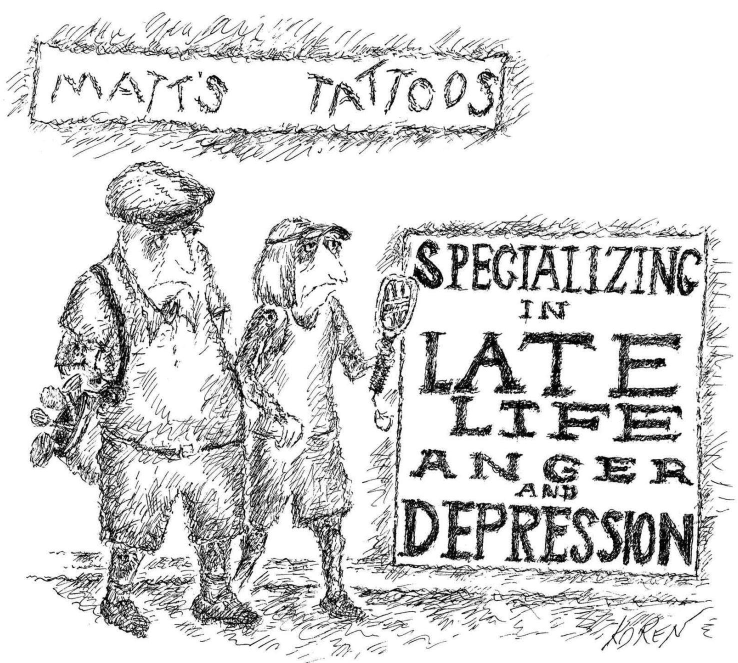
It began in 1995, when President Lee Teng-hui sought a visa to the U.S. to deliver a speech at Cornell. The Clinton Administration at first refused, but after an uproar in Congress it agreed to grant him one. The Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, enraged by what he regarded as Lee's show of independence, ordered missile tests near the island and instructed the P.L.A. to stage military exercises, one of which mimicked an amphibious assault. President Clinton responded by sending a Marine landing ship and two other warships into the Taiwan Strait, followed a week later by an aircraft carrier.

Jiang backed down, but the crisis wasn't over. The next March, after Lee declared his intention to enter Taiwan's first free Presidential election, Jiang ordered new missile tests, along with further exercises. This time, Clinton responded with even greater force, sending two aircraft-carrier battle groups into the waters near Taiwan. Amid the crisis, thousands of Taiwanese requested visas to flee the island, and the stock market plummeted. But Jiang backed down again. "The Chinese were humiliated," a former senior official in the Clinton Administration told me. "They vowed, 'Never again.' "

Since then, China has undertaken an ambitious military buildup that has brought its conventional forces to near-parity with the United States'. The Chinese Navy is now the largest in the world, and, as the U.S. Navy prepares to decommission more of its own ships, the gap is expected to grow. China's ships and submarines are widely regarded as less effective than their American equivalents, but the Chinese are rapidly modernizing.

China’s growing capabilities have coincided with an increasingly aggressive approach to foreign policy. For years, its leaders seldom boasted of their country’s military prowess, following the dictum of the former leader Deng Xiaoping to “hide your strength, bide your time” as the economy grew.

Since becoming the head of the C.C.P., in 2012, Xi Jinping has abandoned that precept. He set no deadline for bringing Taiwan into China but suggested that he intended to be in office when it happened. The Taiwan question, he said, “cannot be passed from generation to generation.” Last year, in a speech commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Communist Party, he warned, “The Chinese people will never allow any foreign forces to bully, coerce, and enslave us. Whoever attempts to do that will surely break their heads on the steel Great Wall built with the blood and flesh of 1.4 billion Chinese people.”



Cartoon by Edward Koren

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Xi’s reëlection as Party chairman in October appeared to herald a new era of assertiveness. He emerged from the Party Congress, held in the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, stronger than ever; he purged his main rivals in the Politburo and its Standing Committee, many of them market-oriented

technocrats, and elevated loyalists, most of them drawn from the military and security establishment. In one highly visible moment, Xi looked on as his aging predecessor, Hu Jintao, was roughly escorted from the stage. Several of Hu's allies, most of them relative moderates, were soon expelled from the Party.

In his speech to the Party Congress, Xi warned of "dangerous storms" ahead and ordered leaders to prepare for an era of "struggle," a word that was edited into the Party's charter in seven places. Phrases that suggested stability, like "peace and development will remain the themes of the era," were removed from a report accompanying the speech. "Our country has entered a period when strategic opportunity coexists with risks and challenges," Xi told the Party's leaders. "The world has entered a period of turbulence and transformation."

Western experts say that Xi's ultimate ambition is for China to supplant the United States as the world's preëminent power. His goal is what he calls China's "great rejuvenation," the recovery of national power, pride, and territory that fell away in the nineteenth century, with much of it surrendered to the West. Making Taiwan part of China, Xi has said, is one of his project's crucial chapters.

For many China specialists in the West, the speech was a watershed. "There are no longer any checks on Xi's power within the system," Matt Pottinger, who served as deputy national-security adviser under President Donald Trump and is now a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, told me. "Any checks that now exist are external to China. Inside the system, Xi can do what he wants, including start a war."

Several times a year, David Ochmanek, a former Pentagon official who is now at the *Rand* Corporation, in Washington, assembles Navy and Air Force officers and officials to conduct war games between the U.S. and China over Taiwan. The participants gather around a large map showing forces arrayed across the region. Those playing the Chinese leaders are steeped in knowledge of China's decision-making; all have access to the U.S. government's best information. "The war games are so real that the participants are exhausted and stressed out—they take them very seriously," Ochmanek told me.

The simulations take many forms, but usually start with a crisis, like the election of a pro-independence President of Taiwan, or with an outright invasion. Many of them end badly for the United States, Ochmanek said: “We usually lose.” Sometimes the Chinese military is able to keep the U.S. Navy at bay and capture Taiwan. Sometimes the Chinese sink U.S. aircraft carriers. This puts the burden on the participants who are mimicking American officials. Do they give up, or escalate? Do they strike China itself? “Sometimes, when the U.S. attacks the Chinese mainland, the Chinese attack Alaska and Hawaii,” he said. “The losses are very heavy.”

It’s not always so dire, Ochmanek said. In some cases, the United States prevails. And even the games that the U.S. loses are not necessarily reflective of how a war would unfold in real life; the main purpose is to evaluate American vulnerabilities. “We learn a lot from these,” Ochmanek said.

Like the war games, almost everything about a potential war with China over Taiwan is theoretical. For the Americans and the Taiwanese, gauging whether and how a war might start involves assessments of each country’s capabilities and objectives, as well as some calculation of the costs that each side would be willing to bear. For American policymakers, that means trying to determine what is required to dissuade China from attempting to change the status quo by force, or, if it does, how to make any war so painful that China would stop without achieving its goals.

American and Taiwanese experts agree that an invasion of Taiwan would be a colossal gamble for the Chinese leadership. A full-scale invasion would likely begin with cyber and missile attacks on Taiwanese military infrastructure, and possibly with an assault by airborne troops. But eventually an invading force of tens or possibly hundreds of thousands of soldiers would have to cross a hundred miles of water, capture the island’s difficult terrain, and sustain an occupation, presumably while under constant attack.

In testimony before Congress last year, Admiral Phil Davidson, then the commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, expressed concern that China could try to take Taiwan before 2027—the year its military modernization is scheduled to be complete. “I think our conventional deterrent is actually

eroding," he said. "I worry that they are accelerating their ambitions to supplant the United States and our leadership role in the rules-based international order, which they have long said that they want to do by 2050. I am worried about them moving that target closer. Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions before then."

Some American officials and experts believe that China's advantages will begin to wane later in the decade. A new generation of U.S. defense improvements is scheduled to come online, and America's defense industrial base, now attenuated, will be revived—or so goes the hope. Many of the same experts believe that China might be entering a long-term economic slowdown, brought on by a rapidly aging population and a maturing economy. "My sense is that the window is opening now, and that it won't be open forever," Elbridge Colby, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense under Trump, told me.

Taiwanese officials say that they are determined to repel an invasion on their own. "We think we would win," Wu, the foreign minister, told me. But almost no one outside Taiwan believes this. "There is no scenario in which Taiwan can defend itself," Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Stanford University and a strategic planner for Pacific Command in the Air Force reserves, told me. A more realistic goal would be to slow down a Chinese invasion, in order to give the U.S., if it chooses to intervene, time to marshal its forces and cover the vast distances to get there. A senior American military officer told me that Taiwan would have to hold off the Chinese for about six weeks. "We think it's in our favor if it takes forty-five days," the officer said.

China's goal would likely be to seize Taiwan as quickly as possible, to present the U.S. with a fait accompli. According to American officials, Beijing worries that it would be unlikely to win a protracted conflict, as the U.S. gathered its allies and revitalized its industrial base. "The longer it goes, the more difficult it gets for the Chinese," Mastro told me.

For years, Taiwan's plan for its defense was to attack the mainland bases that would support an invasion. "The strategy is to go to the origin," Chang, the former deputy commander of the Taiwanese Air Force, told me. The Taiwanese military maintains a formidable conventional force, consisting of

fighter bombers, cruise missiles, and anti-ship missiles. But Taiwan's strategy was designed in the years when its military was closer to parity with China's. Lee Hsi-Min, who served as chief of the general staff of the Taiwanese military until he retired in 2019, told me that he had pushed for reform without success. "The government didn't listen to me," he said.

As China's capabilities have raced ahead, American officials have begun prodding Taiwan to rely instead on a defensive "porcupine strategy," which would aim to slow down an invading force using sea mines, anti-ship missiles, and other inexpensive weapons. Taiwanese defense officials have resisted, according to officials in both countries. Earlier this year, Taiwan asked to buy a number of American MH-60R Seahawk helicopters, used for hunting submarines. The State Department rejected the request, which officials considered emblematic of the old strategy. "They're stuck in the nineteen-eighties," the senior American official told me.

This year, as pressure from China has increased, the Taiwanese government has acted more urgently. The legislature has approved eight billion dollars in emergency defense spending, for such things as drones, anti-ballistic-missile radar, and patrol boats, all made domestically. But these programs will take time. Until then, the biggest obstacle to preparing Taiwan for a conflict appears to be supplies from the United States. Taiwanese officials told me that they were waiting on the delivery of fourteen billion dollars' worth of military hardware, including scores of sea mines and anti-ship missiles—the very weapons the Americans have been urging them to buy. One reason, officials say, is that U.S. warehouses have been stripped bare by the conflict in Ukraine. "The Ukraine war has showed us that we don't have the ammunition stocks to sustain a medium-sized war," the senior Administration official said. "We don't have the industrial base." But Pottinger noted that the demands of supplying Ukraine didn't explain all the delays: "Stingers and Javelin anti-tank missiles are going to Ukraine, but Harpoon anti-ship missiles are not. The Pentagon procurement system is so screwed up and totally bizarre. Our procurement is asleep. Saudi Arabia is in line to receive the Harpoons before Taiwan. We are not arming ourselves or our friends for the most dangerous fight."

The biggest question of all is whether America would intervene. Since the early nineteen-eighties, the U.S. has had no legal obligation to defend

Taiwan, but, because the American Navy was overwhelmingly dominant, the question wasn't urgent. As China has grown more powerful, and Xi's rhetoric more threatening, the matter has become more acute. In recent months, Biden has publicly promised on four occasions to defend Taiwan. Biden's statements buoyed Taiwanese officials—"fourth time!" one texted me after the latest pledge—but White House officials say publicly that American policy remains unchanged.

The Biden White House seems sharply aware of the consequences of failing to insure Taiwan's independence. Allowing the island to fall would give the Chinese Navy unrestricted access to the open oceans, as well as effective dominance in the sea lanes of the western Pacific, through which more than three trillion dollars' worth of goods passes each year. It would also signal to America's democratic allies in the region—including South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines—that the U.S. could not protect them. Many of the pro-Western countries nearby are under pressure from China as it is. "China is influential in the region, but it is not trusted," Bilahari Kausikan, a former senior Singaporean diplomat, told me. "Once you display animosity in a naked way, people don't forget it." He added, "The leaders in Southeast Asia want American leadership."

But that doesn't mean these countries would provide assistance if the U.S. went to war with China. Neither Japan nor South Korea—which have formidable militaries, and which host large American bases—have committed to helping. "With the Japanese, even an attack on the U.S. base in Okinawa would not necessarily trigger self-defense," Mastro told me. The concern is partly that the U.S. would not win a fight against China. The irony, Mastro said, is that a Japanese decision to join in would likely be decisive. "We would win every time," she said.

A war to defend Taiwan would put the United States in direct conflict with the People's Republic of China for the first time since the Korean War, when tens of thousands were killed in face-to-face battles. U.S. officials won't discuss their battle plans in detail, but experts say that an American response would almost certainly involve missile strikes on the Chinese mainland. "Hundreds of thousands of people would die," Mastro said.

Likewise, experts say that if the Chinese invaded they would probably attack American bases in Guam and Japan, as they try to keep the Navy at bay. The U.S. military would likely strike back hard and fast, the senior American official said: “We would destroy a lot of their assets immediately.”

But some experts believe that America’s strategy, organized around aircraft carriers, has grown dangerously obsolete—that carriers, while capable of delivering enormous firepower, are increasingly vulnerable to attack. In some of the scenarios that strategists have explored, American carriers could be attacked by Chinese hypersonic missiles that can damage ships even if they’re intercepted. These strategists imagine something akin to the episode in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, when the Imperial Japanese Navy sank almost the entire Russian Pacific fleet in a single battle. “If we don’t change, we will lose,” Lieutenant General S. Clinton Hinote, a deputy chief of staff at the Pentagon, told me.

There’s another concern for some American officials: that the United States does not have the industrial capacity to sustain a longer war with China, which maintains the world’s largest steel and shipbuilding industries. “Who can rebuild their losses faster?” a senior military officer said. “Who can lay steel for new ships? Who can make carbon fibre faster for new aircraft? Aircraft carriers? Against China, we’re not in a position to take one for one.” The problem, experts say, stretches across the spectrum of manufacturing capability; a recent report by the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, an American research firm, said that, in a war with China, the U.S. Air Force would run out of advanced long-range munitions in less than two weeks.

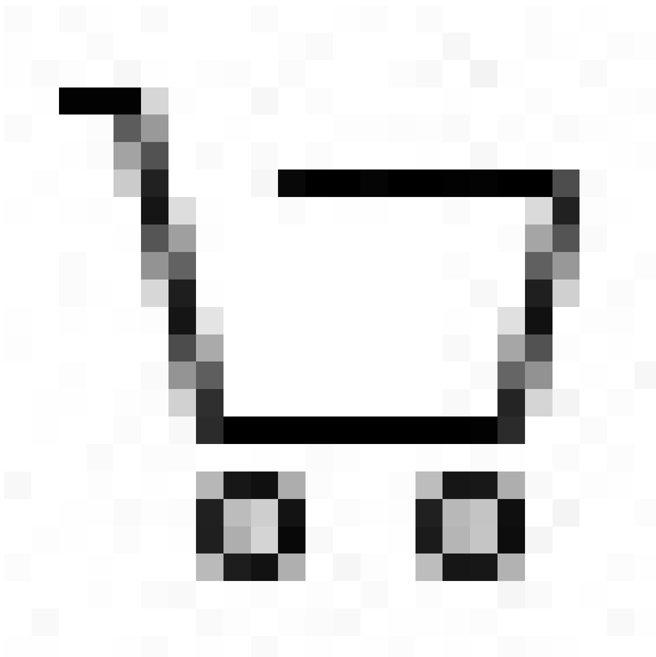


"I wouldn't mind being rescued now that I've finally grown my bangs out."
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

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China has its own reasons for caution. Richard Chen, a former deputy defense minister of Taiwan, told me that the most basic obstacle to an invasion was geography. Only about a dozen of Taiwan's beaches are suitable for landing soldiers and material in large quantities; the water is too shallow for ships to come in close, and the beaches are too narrow to hold more than a battalion—about eight hundred troops—at a time. The beaches that might accommodate larger numbers lie in underdeveloped areas hemmed in by mountains and jungle. "Invading Taiwan would be a disaster for them, and I think they know it," Chen said.

Some experts believe that, for Chinese leaders, the risks and uncertainties of starting a war are still too great. "My sense is that the Chinese don't know what they don't know—and that is the primary deterrent right now. They cannot, with confidence, predict the outcome," an American naval officer told me. "If the generals tell Xi Jinping, 'If you invade Taiwan, you're going to lose one and a half million members of your armed forces,' then Xi can decide whether that is a price he is willing to pay."

But Chen believes that China could try to strangle Taiwan without invading. The island, he said, is vulnerable to a blockade, because so much of what it needs must be imported. The most glaring concern is energy: Taiwan's power plants run almost entirely on liquefied natural gas and coal. Taiwan

has no more than eleven days' worth of gas in reserve, and about six weeks' worth of coal. In addition, Taiwan imports two-thirds of its food. "In two weeks, Taiwan would start to go dark," Chen told me. "No electricity, no phones, no Internet. And people would start to go hungry." Chen said that the U.S. could protect cargo ships travelling to Taiwan, but he expressed skepticism that such an arrangement would last very long. "The U.S. Navy is going to escort ships into Taiwanese ports?" he said. "For how long? Months? Years?"

If China imposed a full naval blockade, it would constitute an act of war under international law. But a more targeted measure—stopping gas and oil tankers, or blocking arms deliveries—would be enough to cripple Taiwan. Dan Patt, a former deputy director at *DARPA* and a fellow at the Hudson Institute, in Washington, believes that this would pose the most difficult challenge for American leaders hoping to rally a response. "If it's not happening on YouTube or social media, there won't be anything for people to see," Patt said. "Do you think American voters are going to want to go to war over a commercial cargo vessel being stopped on its way to Taiwan?"

China is also vulnerable to a blockade: it imports more than seventy per cent of its oil from the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Malacca, a narrow waterway that could be blocked with relative ease. Other routes, through Indonesia, would be slower and more expensive. But China has a hundred-day supply of oil, and much of the shortfall could be made up by Russia. "China could last a long time," Mastro told me.

A larger concern is feeding the populace. China is the world's largest importer of food, especially from the United States. Peter Zeihan, a demographer who has written extensively about China, told me that a cessation of imports would likely result in famine. "A war with the U.S. would be the end of China as a modern state," he said.

One of the most important deterrents to war is Taiwan's role in producing semiconductors. Seventy per cent of the world's most advanced chips are manufactured there, many of them at the Taiwanese Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. "Banks, iPhones, laptops, cars—almost every piece of modern equipment has a chip from Taiwan," an executive in the industry told me. "A world without Taiwan is a world back to the Stone

Age." America has purchased some three hundred billion dollars' worth of chips from Taiwanese factories in the past twenty years. "Apple, Dell, Google—they wouldn't know how to function without them," the executive said.

China is similarly reliant on the highest-end chips produced in Taiwan; it doesn't have the equipment or the expertise to manufacture them. If China seized control of Taiwan's semiconductor factories, it could conceivably force local workers to run them. But the factories depend on a constant flow of Western material, software, expertise, and engineers, without which production would cease in a matter of weeks. Pottinger told me, "If the Chinese took the factories, there's no way the West would help run them." The industry executive wasn't so sure, given the harm that their loss would do to the global economy. "It's mutually assured destruction," he said. Colby, the former official in the Trump Defense Department, went so far as to suggest that perhaps it was best for the U.S. to destroy the plants itself: "If we're going to lose them, we should blow them up."

Some Western experts fear that a Cold War dynamic has developed, in which the United States, trying to deter what it sees as aggressive behavior, is taking steps that seem aggressive to Chinese leaders, who then take their own steps to deter the U.S. This year, as China squeezed Taiwan, the Biden Administration took two steps that Chinese leaders are likely to regard as extremely hostile.

The first was a decision, in October, to ban sales to China of sophisticated semiconductors related to A.I., supercomputing, and chip manufacturing, if any part of them is produced in the U.S. Biden officials have said that the measure, which will likely prevent Beijing from buying billions of dollars' worth of microchips, was intended to curb China's military modernization. "These are unlike any export regulations we've ever had," Patt, the former *DARPA* official, said. How will China react? "If you're China, one reason not to invade Taiwan is that you have a good relationship with the Taiwanese, and they supply a lot of high-end technology," Patt said. "The Chinese might not want to go to war, but they might be tempted to escalate."

The second measure, now working its way through the American bureaucracy, would provide Taiwan with some ten billion dollars' worth of

advanced weaponry and training. In the past, Taiwan paid for most of the weapons that the U.S. supplied; under the proposal, the U.S. would give Taiwan money to cover the purchase. “The Communist Party could decide that this is a red line,” Patt said. “They could decide to quarantine all ships carrying American weapons to prevent them from entering Taiwan. What would we do then?”

An open confrontation would have enormous implications. “A war would fundamentally change the character and complexion of global power,” Pottinger said. “If China loses, it could lead to the collapse of the Party and the end of Xi. If Taiwan falls, we are in a different world, where the tide of authoritarianism becomes a flood.” Once engaged, a fight would be difficult to control. If leaders on either side began to believe that they were losing, they could feel pressure to escalate; China might attack Americans overseas, and the U.S. might intensify attacks on the Chinese mainland. Countries throughout the region, and perhaps the world, would be forced to decide whether and how to join the fight.

Even a minor crisis over Taiwan would likely spur large increases in the cost of insurance for ships in the area, potentially driving up the price of many goods in ways that would ripple through the world economy. Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former diplomat in China, told me, “China’s economy is sagging—there’s low consumption right now, and the principal driver of growth is exports. Would they want to destroy maritime insurance by making it impossible for ships to flow in and out of China? They’d be shutting down their own economy.”

In the Ukraine conflict, the West has had some success imposing sanctions on Russia. Christopher K. Johnson, the head of China Strategies Group and a former China analyst for the C.I.A., said that the Chinese are concerned about sanctions but believe that the U.S. can go only so far without harming its own businesses: “My sense is that Xi and the Politburo have decided that there is no way the West would dare to enact the types of comprehensive financial sanctions they have on Russia.”

Pottinger believes that if there is a war it will be because Xi misreads the conditions. “Xi has huge ambitions,” he told me. “But he has not shown himself to be a reckless gambler. He calculates.” Good bets require precise

assessments of risk, though, and it is not clear that Xi is able to make them. "Information is like oxygen," Pottinger said. "The higher up you go, the thinner it gets. Xi lives on the summit of Mt. Everest." His officials are unlikely to give him bad news, and his American counterparts are unable to reliably communicate with him: "We came to the determination during the Trump Administration that messages we were sending through diplomatic channels were not reaching Xi. The Biden Administration has come to a similar conclusion." The senior Administration official told me that the hotline between the two countries is unreliable, because sometimes the Chinese don't pick up.

In October, Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State, said that China had made "a fundamental decision that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that Beijing was determined to pursue reunification on a much faster timeline." In recent months, China has begun integrating its fleet of civilian ferries, thought to number in the thousands, into military command. Its army has been staging exercises that feature amphibious invasions, practicing air drops for large numbers of ground troops, and moving military formations on railroads to Fujian Province, which sits just across the Taiwan Strait. The practical effect of these moves is to make it harder to tell the difference between an exercise and the real thing. "That's the problem with these military exercises—you just extend them and extend them, you normalize them," Mastro said. "To figure out what they are doing, we are forced to look at much smaller stuff. Are they stockpiling plasma? Are they moving forward medical supplies?" In the Biden Administration, the concern is that the Chinese will abruptly turn an exercise into an invasion. The other Administration official explained the fear: "At some point, they'll decide, 'We have to do this,' and they'll just look for a casus belli."

But Johnson suggested it was dangerous to read these incursions as evidence that the Chinese were planning an imminent invasion. "As Marxists, they believe in the value of agitation and propaganda," he said. "The goal is to wear down Taiwanese resolve and our willingness to intervene. They don't mind if takes years or a decade."

Both sides are caught—seemingly unable to back down without appearing to concede. Ryan Hass, the former diplomat, said, "China has a strategic dilemma. They're frustrated by the status quo, and they're probing for ways

to change it. But taking big, bold actions would come at an extraordinary cost to them. You can't eliminate the possibility that they would be willing to pay that cost, and so we have to be prepared for it. But if you accept the proposition that war is inevitable, and we must do everything we possibly can to prepare for it now, then you risk precipitating the very outcome that your strategy is designed to prevent." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Lee Teng-hui's area of study at Cornell and the year Xi Jinping became the leader of the C.C.P., and mischaracterized the Hakka.

By Evan Osnos

By Isaac Chotiner

By Jeannie Suk Gersen

By Jane Hu

Life and Letters

- Annie Ernaux Turns Memory Into Art

Annie Ernaux Turns Memory Into Art

Many authors write about their lives. Over nearly fifty years, the Nobel laureate has discovered new ways to do it.

By Alexandra Schwartz



“I don’t feel particularly like another woman,” Annie Ernaux said, on a recent afternoon, when she was asked what it was like to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Does winning a prize—*the* prize—turn you into someone else? In the minds of others it does. Although Ernaux has never been preoccupied with her Nobel odds, she has long been considered a contender by those who delight in speculating about which of the world’s writers the Swedes will crown next. Last year, at Nobel time, Ernaux left her home in the Paris suburb of Cergy for a physical-therapy appointment and found herself barraged by journalists who had camped out in front of her gate, “just in case.” The day before this year’s announcement, people at Gallimard, her French publisher, warned her not to go out or answer the phone the next morning. She obliged, even when she saw a Swedish number popping up repeatedly on her caller I.D. (“A bad joke,” she assumed. She has been hoaxed in the past.) A few minutes after one in the afternoon, she turned on the transistor radio in her kitchen and heard her own name. “It was perfectly unreal,” Ernaux said. She was alone with her cats.

Six days later, I met Ernaux in the handsome Tribeca loft of Daniel Simon, the head of her American publisher, Seven Stories Press. At eighty-two, she is still tall (thanks to genetics) and blond (by choice). She had paired her sober black trousers and shoes with splashes of color: a scarf the green of Giverny in summertime, a fuchsia blouse. On the coffee table in front of her was an open Tupperware filled with brownies and macaroons, the remnants of a celebratory lunch that had just been held in her honor at the Press's office, around the corner. Officially, Ernaux was in town to attend the New York Film Festival screening of "The Super 8 Years," a movie that she made with her son David Ernaux-Briot, but the prize had turned the trip into an impromptu victory tour. At the Walter Reade Theatre, and at previously scheduled events at Barnard and the French bookstore Albertine, she was greeted by packed, jubilant houses. There were dinners to be attended, stacks of books to be signed.

Ernaux's books tend to be short, often around a hundred pages, and ferociously sharp, written in a direct, declarative style that she has called "*l'écriture plate*": "flat writing." ("I shall never experience the pleasure of juggling with metaphors or indulging in stylistic play," she once wrote, sounding as resolved as a Franciscan friar—and a little regretful, too.) A reader might expect a certain austerity in Ernaux's manner, but she likes being around people, and it shows. Maybe because she spent years as a middle-school teacher, she is of the "There are no stupid questions" camp when it comes to audience Q. & A.s. Before we met, I had thought that Ernaux, who had not been to New York in more than two decades, might like to see something of the city, but I worried that all the ruckus might have tired her out. No, no, she said. "It's when I'm alone that the fatigue hits."

So much activity had left little time to process the Nobel. "It's true that it's very destabilizing," Ernaux told me, in French. She has kept a diary since she was sixteen—the practice forms the bedrock of her writing life—but she still hadn't recorded the news in it. Her most recent entry dated to the night before the announcement, when, in "a profound state of discontent," she noted that if she won "they'll steal my old age from me." She would be too busy to write for at least a year. At forty, that might not have mattered—but at eighty-two? "I'm already old," she told me. "That's a problem. Well, not a problem. It's a state, the one I happen to be in, and I don't feel at all bad to be in it. I'm just observing what's changed."

I knew about stolen youth, I said, but the idea of stolen old age hadn't occurred to me.

"Exactly," Ernaux said. "What really interests me about youth is that it's always the time that you remember later. But I won't be able to remember my old age. So! I have to live it to the fullest."

In the course of her nearly fifty-year career, Ernaux has published more than twenty books. The first few were what you and I would call autobiographical novels: the protagonists, young women to whom Ernaux lent her own thoughts and experiences, are clearly self-portraits. Pretty soon, though, Ernaux pulled down the scrim of fiction and adopted the first person. Her "I" is not a put-on, some coy invitation to the reader to try to untangle what is real from what is false. Ernaux works exclusively from the factual material of life—her life. But how to shape and present the facts? How to account for their particular power and the way that the truth changes, or doesn't, when exposed to the forces of memory and time? These are profound artistic questions, fundamental to both Ernaux's creative practice and her moral principles. "I believe that any experience, whatever its nature, has the inalienable right to be chronicled," she has written. "There is no such thing as a lesser truth."

That credo may explain why Ernaux has proved inexhaustible to herself as a subject. She doesn't write her way through life in the manner of a Karl Ove Knausgaard, detailing every inch of experience, volume by volume, into the present. She is more like a diver, glimpsing something glimmering far beneath the surface of consciousness and plunging after it. To this impulse she likes to pair forensic methods. Photographs and newspaper records can be as important as her own journal entries as tools for reconstructing the past:

> Naturally I shall not opt for narrative, which would mean inventing reality instead of searching for it. Neither shall I content myself with merely picking out and transcribing the images I remember; I shall process them like documents, examining them from different angles to give them meaning. In other words, I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself.

The book in which these lines appear, "Shame," was published in 1997. (The English translation is by Tanya Leslie.) Its opening is unforgettable: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon." That was in the summer of 1952, when Ernaux was eleven. It took her nearly forty-five years to try to make sense of what this terrifying event meant to her, and, by the book's end, she is still not sure that she has. "I have always wanted to write the sort of book that I find it impossible to talk about afterward, the sort of book that makes it impossible for me to withstand the gaze of others," she writes. This paradoxical wish, to reveal the darkest parts of herself with such pitiless accuracy that she will be forced to fall silent once and for all, is an extraordinary expression of writerly ambition. In any case, it has still not come true.

The purpose of Ernaux's writing, she believes, is not merely to record things that have happened but to "make things exist." This is strong, but it is hardly the strongest thing she has to say about her work. "I am a medium," she told me. "I feel that I'm someone who can transmit things."

Much of what Ernaux transmits—what it is to grow up working class in a society that is contemptuous of workers; what it is to be a woman dispossessed of her body by the laws of the state, or by the overpowering prerogatives of desire—has made her a literary model, even a hero, to those who have shared similar experiences or points of view. Ernaux's book "Happening," in which she describes seeking an illegal abortion as a twenty-three-year-old student, is a feminist touchstone; it was adapted, last year, into a movie by the director Audrey Diwan. Writers like Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, and Marie NDiaye are openly indebted to Ernaux in both substance and style. Ernaux has been asked if she is proud to have been adopted as a kind of literary godmother, or even as a spokesperson, but she feels that "pride" is the wrong word. "I never wanted to write *for*," Ernaux told me. "I write *from*." Still, she was moved by the joy with which readers greeted the Nobel announcement. She considered the prize "a collective" achievement.

The same things that make many people love Ernaux make many others despise her. Relentlessly personal in her art, she has, in public life, taken on the role of the *écrivaine engagée,* outspokenly committed to a host of left-wing political causes, and, while she was being appreciated in New York,

accusations lobbed by her conservative detractors were flying fast in France. Ernaux was an anti-Semite (she supports the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement as a way of advancing the Palestinian cause), an Islamofascist (she considers French antipathy to the hijab to be a means of silencing women), a pedophile (her latest book, "Le Jeune Homme," recounts an affair that Ernaux had in her fifties with a man some thirty years her junior), *wokiste* (she is a proponent of #MeToo and of the gilets jaunes). "Decidedly, this 'academy' of old shriveled bigwigs has gone a step further into the absurd and the indecent," railed one editorial beneath the headline "*The Nobel in Literature Definitively Discredited*." In the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*, a writer disparaged the decision to award the "high priestess of autofiction" for a "lifetime spent writing about herself."

"They think I'm not legitimate," Ernaux said to me. "What disgusts them is that there are people who have found, in literature, something that speaks to them, and that those people aren't C.E.O.s or company bosses." Ernaux is also the first French woman to win the Nobel, "and that doesn't work for them, at all." For years, she has dealt with sexist criticism of her work, and not just from the right. After she published "Simple Passion," a soul-baring account of a love affair with a married man, a literary critic at the liberal weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* took to calling her Madame Ovary.

I suggested to Ernaux that there might be something validating in the present outpouring of loathing. Hadn't she been writing for years about the contempt of the rich for the poor, of men for women, of the dominant for the downtrodden? "It's proof," she agreed. Still, it depressed her. In the uproar, Ernaux saw a renewal of the frightening wave of outrage that had engulfed her ten years ago, when she published a column in *Le Monde* decrying "A Literary Elegy for Anders Breivik," a barely concealed apologia for the Norwegian mass murderer by Richard Millet, an author and editor at Gallimard. While condemning Breivik's crimes, Millet blamed them on multiculturalism and the erosion of European Christian identity; Ernaux called his text "a fascist pamphlet that dishonors literature." Three days later, Millet stepped down from Gallimard's prestigious reading committee. Many others shared Ernaux's disgust—for instance, J. M. G. Le Clézio, Nobelled in 2008. But Ernaux's column, counter-signed by a hundred and eighteen fellow-writers, was seized upon as a flash point. *L'affaire Richard Millet* became a kind of referendum on what wasn't yet termed cancel culture, with

Ernaux denounced as a harridan intent on enforcing politically correct censorship at the expense of a man's career. "I was called a killer," Ernaux said. She herself felt that "it was really a *hallali*"—a hunting call, with Ernaux as the chased stag.

One of the phrases most associated with Ernaux, "*transfuge de classe*," can seem derogatory. A "*transfuge*" is a defector. But Ernaux herself uses the term, partly as an objective description of her situation as a woman who, by dint of education, rose to the middle class and then, by force of talent, to the cultural élite—and partly, it can seem, as a kind of deserved epithet that expresses her own ambivalent feelings at having moved so far from the world of her parents. In 1983, when she published "A Man's Place," an account of her father's life, she took as an epigraph a quotation by Jean Genet: "May I venture an explanation: writing is the ultimate recourse for those who have betrayed."

Annie Duchesne was born in September, 1940, in Lillebonne, a town in Normandy where her parents ran a café-grocery. Since the nineteenth century, the area, which sits in a valley north of the Seine, had been dominated by cotton mills. "Even now, to mention the Valley in prewar times is to evoke images of horror: the highest concentration of alcoholics and unmarried mothers, the damp running down the walls, and the babies dying from diarrhea within two hours," Ernaux writes in "A Woman's Story" (1987), a companion to "A Man's Place" about her mother. For her parents, though, life there was a step up. Both Alphonse Duchesne and Blanche Duménil left school at the age of twelve, Alphonse to labor as a farmhand, Blanche for a job in a margarine factory. They met while working at a rope factory in Yvetot, Blanche's home town. Alphonse was tall, owned a bicycle, and went to the cinema. "He didn't look common," Blanche liked to say. Seven years younger, she was vivacious, proud, and temperamental, quick to laugh and quick to shout, a red-headed Catholic who loved to read novels and refused to miss Mass. They married in 1928, to the disdain of Alphonse's sisters, who had worked as housemaids and looked down on factory girls. Blanche scorned them back, along with anyone else who made a living "licking the arses of the rich."

Blanche proved to be the engine of the marriage, the dreamer and the doer. It was her idea to take over the café-grocery—she was a natural behind the

counter—though this was not the end of hard times. The clientele was poor, and often asked for credit; Alphonse worked other jobs to keep the family afloat. Then there was the German Occupation to deal with, and the chaotic scramble of rationing and rebuilding that followed the war. When Annie was five, the family moved to Yvetot and took over another, more profitable café-grocery, living in the rooms upstairs. That is where Ernaux grew up: sleeping with her parents in a single bedroom, using an outdoor toilet, greeting customers with a loud, clear "*Bonjour*" while watching, at Blanche's instruction, to see that they didn't pinch anything from the shelves.

These are the foundational facts of Ernaux's early life, and she gives them to us straight. It is in "A Man's Place" that she introduces the idea of *l'écriture plate*, which is rendered in the book's English edition as a "neutral way of writing," though that's not really right. Language is never neutral, Ernaux says. The purpose of her "flat" style is political, not just artistic. She doesn't want to sentimentalize or aggrandize the lives of the working poor, to tilt toward the twin traps of pity and populism. She uses the kinds of richly "novelistic" detail that a modern-day Dickens might make much of, but the effect is clinical, not colorful, as if we were seeing slides placed under a microscope: the sachets of garlic that were sewn inside children's shirts when her father was small to protect against worms; the way that her paternal grandmother, a woman of style, refused to piss standing up as other country people did; the way that her maternal grandmother, a woman of thrift, did the laundry with ash and used the stove's fading heat to dry plums. "This knowledge—handed down from mother to daughter for many centuries—stops at my generation," Ernaux writes. "I am only the archivist." So she has taken the laundry ash and the dried plums and used them to produce a sociology of a lost world. (Bourdieu was a big influence.)

But there is also a psychological side to what Ernaux is doing. Both "A Man's Place" and "A Woman's Story" begin with a parent's death, and not just the death; before we have even met these people, Ernaux shows us their corpses. Here is her father, who died unexpectedly at home at the age of sixty-seven—his open eyes, his bared gums, the spidery veins on his chest, even his penis, briefly exposed as his clothes are changed for burial—and here is her mother, wrapped in a sheet at the nursing home where she spent her last years, stricken with Alzheimer's. There is something icy and

estranging in this way of looking; the first words of "A Woman's Story"—"My mother died on Monday 7 April"—echo Camus's famous "Today, Maman died," and a better model of detachment would be hard to find. But detachment doesn't always equal indifference. Ernaux's resolve here seems very like the performance of a child who has vowed to act adult, to be brave in the face of terror. "Flat" writing can seem easy, even artless. Actually, Ernaux says, it is excruciatingly hard, but introducing tenderness would corrupt her entire project:

> When I think of my mother's violent temper, outbursts of affection, and reproachful attitude, I try not to see them as facets of her personality but to relate them to her own story and social background. This way of writing, which seems to bring me closer to the truth, relieves me of the dark, heavy burden of personal remembrance by establishing a more objective approach. And yet something deep down inside refuses to yield and wants me to remember my mother purely in emotional terms—affection or tears—without searching for an explanation.

"The truth" is hardly a fixed concept, in life or in literature, and, for a moment, Ernaux lets us glimpse two versions of it at once: the cool crust of material reality, and, bubbling hot underneath, her own emotions, effortfully suppressed. "A Man's Place," Ernaux's fourth book, was her first big success. It won the Prix Renaudot; Ernaux heard from legions of readers, and not just French ones, who felt that she was writing to and about them. This is not how people tend to react to sociology. Ernaux has said that she gave them "a mirror." In other words, she gave them art.

At the same time, Ernaux says, *l'écriture plate* came to her naturally. Language was the original dividing line between the place her family came from and the one where she was going. Blanche, whose "overriding concern" was to give her daughter "everything she hadn't had," insisted on sending Annie to a private Catholic school. Her teachers corrected her if she slipped into Norman dialect, and when she went home she corrected her parents. "How do you expect me to speak properly if you keep on making mistakes?" Ernaux remembers asking her father, in tears. When, at nineteen, she left France to work as an au pair in London, her mother wrote her stiff letters reporting what was going on in the neighborhood, who had died, what

the weather was like. Ernaux replied in kind: “Any attempt at style would have been taken as a snub.”

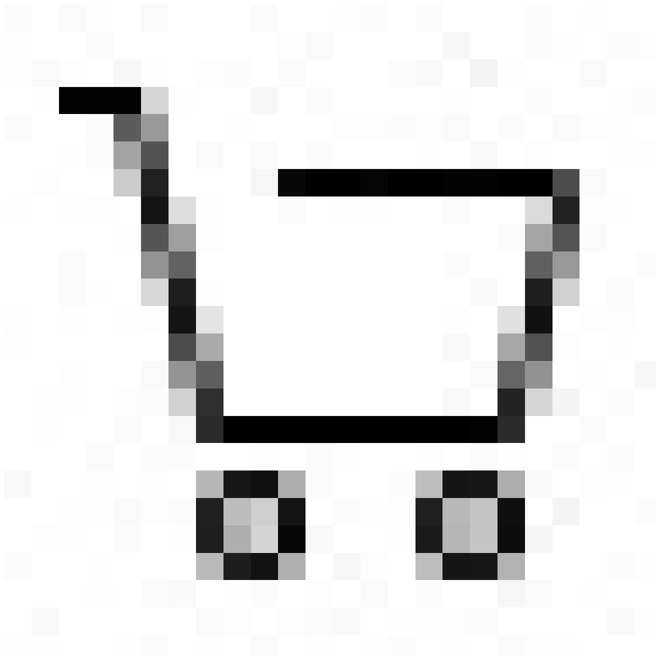


“We take classic dishes and reimagine them to be smaller than you’re used to.”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

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Ernaux went to university in Rouen, where she studied literature. She devoured nineteenth-century novels and loved the boldness of existentialism. But what she needed, for her own writing, was "another language," one unknown to the educated class. Writing as simply as she could allowed Ernaux to be understood by her parents, and, later, by people like them. It also allowed her to hide. In "A Woman's Story," Ernaux calls the fact that her mother "spent all day selling milk and potatoes so that I could sit in a lecture hall and learn about Plato" a "blatant injustice." This is undoubtedly true, but impersonal, pamphlet-like. Only while writing "Shame," ten years after Blanche's death, could she express her own feelings about their divide. Unleashed by the shock of her father's attack on her mother—a good-natured man, he one day snapped under the pressure of Blanche's hectoring, and grabbed a scythe—shame descended on eleven-year-old Annie like a kind of freak puberty, an irrevocable condition that marked childhood's end. She saw the humiliating markers of her family's status everywhere: at school, faced with the "indifference and scorn" of the other girls; at the dentist, where she was asked if a rotting tooth hurt when she drank cider, the drink of the working class. And yet shame has acted as a preservative of the past. Proust had his madeleine. Ernaux's way of summoning lost time may be less sweet, but it works just as well.

At twenty-two, Ernaux made a vow: “If by twenty-five I haven’t fulfilled my promise of writing a novel, I’ll commit suicide.” She did write one then, but she couldn’t get it published. Even so, she chose life—or two of them. She married, had two children, and became a teacher. She had met Philippe Ernaux in Bordeaux, where he studied political science and she earned her teaching certification. “We discussed Jean-Paul Sartre and freedom, we went to see Antonioni’s ‘L’Avventura,’ we shared the same left-wing views,” Ernaux writes. But after they married, in 1964, the couple moved to Annecy for Philippe’s work and settled into a constricted domestic routine. Ernaux kept house, cooked the meals, and looked after the children while commuting to classes and grading papers—“a woman with no time to spare.” Her other life, that of a “literary being,” she hid, writing in secret to shield her work from her husband’s eyes.

In this, she had an unwitting collaborator. After Alphonse died, Blanche sold the café-grocery and went to live with Ernaux and her family. “She brought me all my course notebooks, my math workbooks, everything I had, but not my diaries,” Ernaux told me. “I didn’t dare say to her, ‘Maman, why didn’t you bring my diaries?’ I knew what she’d say: ‘Because of what was inside them.’ ” It turned out that Blanche had destroyed the diaries: everything Ernaux had written from the ages of sixteen to twenty-three. “She did it so that my husband would never read them,” Ernaux said. “To save my image, basically.” *Later you’ll spit in our faces*, Blanche used to complain when Annie showed signs of adolescent rebellion. If Blanche was sometimes inclined to see her daughter as a “class rival,” as Ernaux has written, she nonetheless lived in fear that Ernaux would compromise herself and be shunted back to the starting line.

This domestic period, when Ernaux’s sons were young and her marriage still intact, forms the basis of “The Super 8 Years.” In 1972, the Ernauxs bought a camera to make home videos. It was David Ernaux-Briot’s idea to turn the decade of resulting footage into a film. He sent a cut to his mother, and asked her to write and record a text to accompany the images, which she did while in isolation at the start of the pandemic. Her voice—deliberately paced and disarmingly, even girlishly light—serves as the film’s main soundtrack. What had it been like, I wanted to know, to collaborate with her son?

“Oh, but I didn’t collaborate!” she said, and laughed.

Still, this way of tandem working was new for Ernaux. She has used pictures as prompts before, most notably in "The Years" (2008), her most expansive book, a sweeping generational portrait in which she marks the passage of time by describing photographs of herself, subjecting her own image to the same frank gaze that she applied to her parents' bodies. Here, though, she was guided by someone else's gaze—that of Philippe, the movie's de-facto cinematographer, who, as Ernaux dryly remarked at the New York screening, died, in 2009, "of a smoker's cancer." It never occurred to either of them that she would use the camera herself. Shooting was a man's job.

Naturally, Ernaux's narration dwells on the intersection of the personal and the political. There are trips to unusual destinations like Communist Albania and Allende's Chile, which the couple wistfully saw as a vision of what France could have become if the uprising of 1968 had succeeded. Mostly, though, there is home life, as ripe for decoding as any foreign culture. Ernaux is wry on the subject of the couple's interior decoration, the patterned wallpaper and objects carefully selected from antique stores, "all the things that marked us as newcomers to the bourgeoisie." And then there is Ernaux herself. "In the film, I often speak of myself in the third person, because, really, I am another person," Ernaux said to me. In one sequence, filmed at the Bayreuth Festival in the summer of 1973, Ernaux stands facing the camera, looking just like the modern young wife she is. Already, though, she is on her way to becoming someone else. Soon she will learn that the book she has been writing has been accepted for publication. "Les Armoires Vides" ("Cleaned Out"), which appeared the next year, is an autobiographical novel about a literature student who thinks back on her youth while she undergoes an illegal abortion. Ernaux had simply mailed the manuscript to Gallimard, telling no one.

People don't tend to film their arguments and fights. Ernaux has hinted at her husband's philandering, but, true to form, she is inclined to consider their separation to be as much a public phenomenon as a private one. "All around them, divorce proliferated," Ernaux writes, in "The Years," referring to her cohort of women who had grown up being told that premarital sex was a sin, and pregnancy out of wedlock a disaster, only to see the next generation met with "unanimous approval" when they dodged the altar. In 1981, Ernaux published her third novel, "A Frozen Woman," an account of a young wife and mother who comes to feel suffocated by the constraints of

domestic life. That is when the family videos end. Ernaux had left the marriage for good.

Now Ernaux came into her own. She published the books about her father and mother. She had an audience, a name. Then, in 1991, came "Simple Passion," and everything readers thought they knew about this restrained, cerebral woman went out the window. "From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place," Ernaux writes at the start. The sixty or so short pages that follow amount to a narrative of willing captivity. During the months of her affair with A., as she calls her lover, Ernaux bends toward him as a flower toward the sun. She stays at home when she should go out; she doesn't use the vacuum cleaner for fear of covering the phone's ring. A. is a foreigner, an Eastern European; his weakness for Western luxuries reminds Ernaux of herself as a teen-age "*parvenue*," craving the dresses and vacations that her richer friends had. A. shares none of her intellectual interests, but so what? She herself can only listen to love songs.

After A. returns home, Ernaux grows morbid. If he has given her *AIDS*, she thinks, "at least he would have left me that." And yet, in this sex-saturated book, there is not a lot of sex. Ernaux is at her most graphic in the preface, where she describes watching an X-rated movie on TV, stunned by its matter-of-fact depiction of what for centuries had been taboo. Writing, she thinks, should try to achieve the same effect: "a feeling of anxiety and stupefaction, a suspension of moral judgment."

"Simple Passion" was a major best-seller, and no surprise; if you have experienced the sort of agony that Ernaux describes, you won't come across a more distilled depiction of it. Some readers, though, felt betrayed. When Ernaux was invited to give a talk at Wellesley, the students attacked her for being submissive. Didn't she claim to be a feminist? Yes, and that is what made "Simple Passion" so powerful, and so terrifying. Ernaux had managed to convey the force with which desire can render the rest of life—the rest of the self—instantly void. She wasn't advocating for women to lose their heads over a man. She was describing what it feels like when it happens, as you might describe a tornado that has flattened your house.

A decade later, Ernaux did something surprising and published excerpts of the diary she had kept during the affair. That book, "Getting Lost," was released in the U.S. in September, in a translation by Alison L. Strayer. Here, finally, is the sex that Ernaux had mostly elided in "Simple Passion"—the positions, the fluids—and the torture of the waiting, unspooled in all its real-time wretchedness. "My whole life has been an effort to tear myself away from male desire, in other words, from my own desire," Ernaux confesses. (Maybe the Wellesley students had a point.) Ernaux is not, as a rule, a funny writer, but the friction between her finely developed mind and the tyrannical demands of her body produces moments of true comedy. When she loses a contact lens and finds it on her lover's penis, her first thought is of Zola, "who lost his monocle between the breasts of women." Then there is the gulf between her devotion to her lover—"addiction" might be the better word—and her awareness of his obvious mediocrity. Now called by his true initial, S., he turns out to be a thirty-five-year-old Soviet apparatchik whom the forty-eight-year-old Ernaux met on a writer's junket to the U.S.S.R. "Again I long to see him," she records. "And yet what it all comes down to is this: he fucks, he drinks vodka, he talks about Stalin."

Here Ernaux risks indulgence. "The Years," which covers the period from 1941 to 2006 and is practically cosmic in its tone and scope, runs well over two hundred pages, but "Getting Lost" is somehow longer. What pushed her to publish? In the period following the affair, she told me, "I was forbidden from reading the diary by a very jealous lover." She agreed to seal it in an envelope, where it stayed until their breakup, six years later. "Then I read it, and I discovered that it had a fabulous unity. But it wasn't at all the same as 'Simple Passion.' It was another text. And I was another woman, too. I felt like I was reading a novel. It was the writing itself that was working on me, as if I didn't know what came next!" This was the ecstatic surrender not of the lover but of the reader. Ernaux was transfixed by a fictional character, who happened to be herself.

This notion of becoming another woman—of the self transfigured by time—animates all of Ernaux's work. As she says in "Shame," writing about her vanished, younger self is one of only two ways she knows "to bring the two of us together." (The other, orgasm, "the moment when my sense of identity and coherence is at its highest," is, needless to say, more ephemeral.) But,

she explains in "Simple Passion," the passage of time can also be a comfort, even a creative necessity:

> Naturally I feel no shame in writing these things because of the time which separates the moment when they are written—when only I can see them—from the moment when they will be read by other people, a moment which I feel will never come. By then I could have had an accident or died; a war or a revolution could have broken out. This delay makes it possible for me to write today, in the same way I used to lie in the scorching sun for a whole day at sixteen, or make love without contraceptives at twenty: without thinking about the consequences.

Ernaux sometimes ends her books with the dates of their composition, as if to tie them to that precious period when she lived with them alone. "Happening," published in 2000, was written between February and October of 1999, thirty-six years after the events it recounts. "I had a sense of writing out of time," Ernaux told me. Abortion had been permitted in France since 1975. People took it for granted; no one seemed to be interested in commemorating the struggle, led by Simone Veil, to legalize it, or in remembering the horrors that women faced before. "There's a parade every Fourteenth of July," Ernaux said. "We celebrate that; we aren't supposed to forget. But if it concerns women? It's all over, no one needs to talk about it. I had the feeling that I would die one day and there would be no trace of it. I wouldn't have been able to transmit whatever it was that I needed to."

What Ernaux needed to transmit, in that blunt, indelible book, was what it had been like to seek an abortion in the fall of 1963 and the winter of 1964, when anyone who performed an abortion, or sought one, or encouraged one, or even advocated for the use of contraception, could be fined and sent to prison. Ernaux was studying in Rouen when she discovered that she was pregnant. "Somehow I felt there existed a connection between my social background and my present condition," she writes. So much for her fancy education: "My ass had caught up with me, and the thing growing inside me I saw as the stigma of social failure." Even so, she thought that getting the abortion would be easy. She had read about abortions in novels; she had heard women in Yvetot discussing them under their breath. She knew that it would be painful. She had no idea that she could die.

She learned. Although "Happening" is written with Ernaux's usual piercing clarity, the book seems to unfold in a kind of suffocating twilight as the avenues pursued by the twenty-three-year-old Annie are shut off, one by one. A male friend whom she confides in invites her to dinner with his wife and child and then tries to seduce her. Doctors refuse to help. Annie desperately tries to find a friend of a friend rumored to know an abortionist. She is supposed to be working on her thesis, on female Surrealists, but she can focus only on her own female reality. "In a strange way, my inability to write my thesis was far more alarming than my need to abort," Ernaux writes. "I had stopped being 'an intellectual.' I don't know whether this feeling is widespread. It causes indescribable pain." A different kind of pain follows a failed attempt to solve her problem with a pair of knitting needles. All the while, she feels "time flowing inside and outside of me"—the common calendar moving forward, her private one moving back.

It has been speculated, fairly, that Ernaux's writing on abortion may be why the Nobel jury saw fit to award the prize to her this year, less than four months after Roe v. Wade was overturned. During her October visit to Barnard, Ernaux was asked, almost as if she were a politician, if she wished to say something to American women. She found it extraordinary, she replied, that the U.S., which had legalized abortion before France, should "return to savagery." This remark inspired applause. But "Happening," when it was published, got a tepid response. "It was a book that bothered people," Ernaux told me. Aside from the events themselves, rendered with almost unbearably claustrophobic exactitude—the abortion, and what happens afterward, is so brutal that even the film adaptation seems gentle by comparison—there is Ernaux's total lack of guilt about what she did. There may be no parade, but for years she celebrated the night of the procedure "as an anniversary."

For the past few years, Ernaux told me, she has had the sense that she has fulfilled a certain trajectory. "No, not a trajectory. A destiny." She laughed, but she meant it. "Not a destiny that was written from the beginning. One that was constructed, bit by bit, of course."

One big reason for that is "A Girl's Story," which Ernaux published in 2016. The book deals with the summer of 1958, when Ernaux, nearly eighteen, left home on her own for the first time, to work as a counsellor at a summer

camp. On her third night there, she is selected by the twenty-two-year-old head counsellor for a tryst, though to put that word to their encounter would be to imply romance, or at least enjoyment. Annie is a protected only child of extreme social naïveté, a girl who "does not know how to make a telephone call, has never taken a shower or bath," who feels herself free and on the verge of life, ready to escape home, have adventures, fall in love. Now she is laid down on a strange man's bed and watches as her body is used for his pleasure. But the experience is neither one of "horror nor shame, only an obedience to what was happening." Far from seeing herself as a victim, she becomes slavishly devoted to the fact of her submission before this indifferent "master."

That searing episode forms the kernel of the book. Around it, Ernaux builds a kind of detective story. The Annie from 1958 is a missing person. No photographs of her from that summer exist. The diaries she kept were burned by her mother. But Ernaux knows that the girl is still alive; she has been living inside her for decades. She is at the root of everything Ernaux has become as a woman and as a writer, and now she must be faced on her own terms.

There seemed something liberating in this, but Ernaux disagreed.

"I never considered writing to be a form of liberation," she said. "The image that I have is always of descending, of deepening something. And there isn't much freedom down there, not really. Often, when I speak with other writers —with female writers, really—the image we have of writing really varies. Some of them say that, for them, it's a way of going up toward something. But, for me, it's the absolute opposite. Not going underground, exactly. But into a well." What draws her down? An idea of some kind? No: "An obsession."

The image of the well brings to mind a rescue mission. Ernaux, so devoted to chronicling what she calls "the stupefaction of the real," has a mystical side, too. "It seems to me that I have finally freed the girl of '58, broken the spell that kept her prisoner for over fifty years," Ernaux writes of her younger self. This is triumphant, magical; it would make a wonderful ending. But it is not the end of the book, only its halfway point. All endings, in Ernaux's world, are temporary. The meaning of what she describes keeps

shifting as time does. Critics will be tempted to refer to Ernaux's output, this fifty-year spelunking of the self, as an œuvre, but she hates that word. "An 'œuvre' is something that's closed," she told me. "And mine will be closed when I'm dead." ♦

By Lauren Collins

By Joshua Rothman

By Rachel Aviv

By The New Yorker

Musical Events

- **Kristian Bezuidenhout Unleashes the Subtle Power of the Fortepiano**

Kristian Bezuidenhout Unleashes the Subtle Power of the Fortepiano

On a modern piano, performers have to play Mozart with restraint, but on an earlier instrument they can push to extremes.

By Alex Ross



The other day, the keyboard player Kristian Bezuidenhout was standing onstage at Hertz Hall, on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, in a state of slight panic. Around him were four instruments housed at the university's music department, representing stages in keyboard development from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth. On one side was a harpsichord, of the kind that Bach might have played. In the middle were two fortepianos—early-stage pianos with a light action and a crisp, characterful sound. Behind them was an 1854 grand piano, from the illustrious firm of Érard. Modern grands are well-tooled machines, fairly predictable in their behavior, even if virtuosos fuss over them and badger technicians with requests for adjustments. Older pianos, with their variegated mechanisms and idiosyncratic construction, are far more temperamental. To present a program on four different historical instruments

—as Bezuidenhout was going to do later that day, in a recital for the Berkeley series Cal Performances—is to invite chaos.

"These older instruments, and even the modern copies, function so differently in rehearsal and in concert," Bezuidenhout told me. "Sometimes you have this feeling in rehearsal: 'Oh, yes, this is really making sense, the piano is really helping me.' Then, in concert, they kind of turn on you. The five-octave pianos, especially, can betray you, leave you in the dust. You say to yourself, 'Where is that sound I heard four hours ago?' It may have to do with a change of humidity, or a way of reacting to the room. But it's as if they can sense your level of stress, your preoccupation, and then they seize up—like some kind of really mean cat."

The Érard piano was being particularly skittish. With a seven-octave range and an eight-foot frame, it looked like a modern piano, but it was not acting like one. Bezuidenhout played some chords in the octave below middle C. "Down here, it sounds so lovely," he said. "But as you go up higher"—he ventured an octave above middle C—"it gets impossibly bright." The timbre was curiously strident and unpleasant. Bezuidenhout tried shutting the piano lid, so that the soundboard was completely enclosed. He played a few more chords, then shook his head.

Bezuidenhout later conferred with Jeremy Geffen, the executive and artistic director of Cal Performances. Geffen, a veteran administrator who worked for many years at Carnegie Hall, told the keyboardist simply to ignore the Érard if he didn't respond to it. Fortunately, Bezuidenhout was finding more of a rapport with the larger of the two fortepianos—a copy of a Viennese Graf instrument from the eighteen-twenties. He decided to shift his program so that most of it would be divided between the fortepianos.

"Sometimes you ask yourself why the hell you are doing this," Bezuidenhout told me. "But the need to adapt to changing circumstances is what makes it interesting. And there are times when the stars do align, when it's as if the camera has been perfectly set up, and it's the most beautiful thing you've heard in your life. It's really worth it for those moments."

Bezuidenhout, a forty-three-year-old musician who was born in South Africa and spent much of his youth in Australia, fell in love with period instruments

at an early age, when he began listening to Mozart recordings by the pianist Malcolm Bilson and the conductor John Eliot Gardiner. "The character and energy of the music-making, the level of detail, the freshness—I'd never heard Mozart played like that before," he told me. He later had lessons with Bilson at the Eastman School of Music and made a specialty of the fortepiano.

"I remember working on Mozart's F-Major Sonata, K. 332," Bezuidenhout went on. "When you play Mozart on a modern piano, everyone is always talking about *grazioso*, elegant phrasing, 'Mozart style.' Scale it down, be careful not to overwhelm the music. On the fortepiano, it's the opposite: you've got to push, you've got to play as if your life depended on it. Automatically, the music takes on a completely different character: instead of restraint, there's a wonderful feeling of letting go. And with the direct action of these little hammers on the strings, with the natural decay in the mechanism, there's suddenly a lot more space between the notes. That instantly changed what Mozart meant to me."

Between 2009 and 2014, Bezuidenhout recorded a nine-volume cycle of Mozart's keyboard music, for the Harmonia Mundi label. He used modern copies of Anton Walter five-octave fortepianos, from Mozart's time. Bilson, Paul Badura-Skoda, and Ronald Brautigam, among others, had undertaken similar projects; a vigorous survey by the pianist-scholar Robert Levin is now available on the ECM label. But I prize Bezuidenhout's interpretations for their tonal variety, their richness of phrasing, their sense of fantasy. His Mozart is beautiful without ever being pretty—the fortepiano's innate pungency makes sure of that.

More recently, Bezuidenhout has recorded the Beethoven concertos on fortepiano, working alongside Pablo Heras-Casado and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. "With Beethoven, there's a feeling of the instrument starting to buckle under the pressure, as if you're in an airplane in a stretch of severe turbulence," Bezuidenhout told me. "Mozart never pushes to that extent—he's kind, he's mindful of human and mechanical limitations. Beethoven doesn't care, and that's actually rather exciting." Hearing this most familiar of composers on a fortepiano restores the shock of his advance; on a modern instrument, he is always a little bit tamed.

Bezuidenhout began his Berkeley recital at the harpsichord, playing Bach's Toccata in D Minor. He then moved to the smaller fortepiano—a five-octave model made by Rodney Regier, in imitation of Walter—and launched into Mozart's Fantasia in C Minor. The timbral shift was notable: Mozart probably would not have devised the spare, gnomic opening utterances of the Fantasia on the harpsichord, where sound dies quickly and continuous activity is paramount. Bezuidenhout stayed at the Walter for Beethoven's "Pathétique"; his account had a startling ferocity, with fortissimos landing like gut punches.

The Graf-style fortepiano, a six-and-a-half-octave instrument with considerable carrying power, was the sweetheart of this keyboard litter. It, too, came from Regier, who fashions fortepianos in a barn in Freeport, Maine. Bezuidenhout began by offering two pieces by Schubert: the Andantino from "Moments Musicaux" and the slow movement from the Sonata in A Minor, D. 537. The timbres that emerged were thoroughly bewitching: an F-sharp-minor arpeggio figure in the Andantino sounded as if it were being played by a cello and a bassoon in unison. Bezuidenhout deepened the otherworldly atmosphere by making use of a moderator pedal, which causes a strip of cloth to be inserted between the hammers and the strings.

Bezuidenhout stayed at the Graf for a smattering of Mendelssohn: six of his "Songs Without Words" and his Three Fantasies or Caprices, Op. 16. With the fortepiano's tang and grit, these pieces came across more as miniature tone poems than as salon confections. Only for the final item on the program—Clara Schumann's Romance in A Minor—did Bezuidenhout move to the forlorn Érard. Partway through the piece, he got up and returned to the Graf, eliciting a contented sigh from the audience.

Some didacts of the early-music world would maintain that certain composers *must* be performed on so-called original instruments. Bezuidenhout, in remarks from the stage at Hertz, distanced himself from the charged word "authentic," describing his work as "historically inspired." For me, the experience of hearing a broad range of repertory filtered through instruments of various eras had the effect of freeing the composers from the tyranny of norms. This recital captured, above all, a sense of music as an evolutionary art, reacting to technology in flux and history in motion. ♦

By Oussama Zahr

By Tom Zito

By Amanda Petrusich

By Richard Brody

On Television

- **Even Diana’s Revenge Dress Can’t Save Season 5 of “The Crown”**

Even Diana's Revenge Dress Can't Save Season 5 of "The Crown"

Few premières have been as fervently anticipated as that of the Netflix series' latest season, the first following the Queen's death. But the ten episodes are a startling letdown—a decline that parallels the monarchy's own.

By Inkoo Kang



If "The Crown" is remembered as a great series, instead of just a great-looking one, it'll likely owe that reputation to its spectacular fourth season. The first three volumes of the lavishly budgeted Netflix series were often snoozy and uneven, presenting portraits of Queen Elizabeth II and the rest of the Royal Family that were as rigid as the institution they served. Season 4 jolted the series awake, with the introduction of two outsiders, Diana Spencer and Margaret Thatcher, whose perspectives clarified the Windsors' blinkered privilege and their warped but undeniable humanity. At last, "The Crown" became the ambitious if staunchly royalist palace drama that its creator, Peter Morgan, had intended.

Few TV premières have been as fervently anticipated as that of "The Crown" 's fifth season—the first following the Queen's death, in September, at the age of ninety-six. But the ten episodes, released on November 9th, are a startling letdown. Season 4 kicked off with a literal bang; early on, a boat with a member of the Royal Family on board was bombed by the I.R.A. Season 5, set in the nineties, also launches with a vessel: the Queen's royal yacht, Britannia, which a young Elizabeth describes as "dependable and constant, capable of weathering any storm." By 1991, the moldering ship requires a multimillion-pound renovation—ideally on the government's dime—as the Queen, now in her sixties, tells Prime Minister John Major. Such a heavy-handed metaphor for the monarchy's decline might be forgiven were it a minor plotline. But Morgan hangs on to it like a worn-out security blanket.

Before the première, the Firm's supporters pressured Netflix to explicitly state that the series is a dramatization. Presumably, they were concerned about the continuation of the story line involving Diana (played this season by Elizabeth Debicki), whose poor treatment and suicidal despair were recently brought up by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Another cause for alarm was the focus on an aging Queen (Imelda Staunton) who is out of step with the modern world. When Elizabeth ascended the throne, at twenty-five, she became its unlikely savior. Four decades later, she may be its greatest liability. Advisers shield her from bad news; she initially thinks that Charles and Diana are happy. A recurring theme is her inability to figure out a remote control. Elizabeth, a symbol of tradition and constancy, believes that she should continue as she's always done, even if it means repeating mistakes. When her daughter, Anne (Claudia Harrison), wants to marry a divorcé (she, too, is divorced), the Queen's instinct is to consign her to a face-saving isolation, as Elizabeth once did to her own sister, Margaret. As the Empire decays—Hong Kong reverts to Chinese control in 1997—so does its figurehead, whose standing in the polls plummets.

There's an epic sensibility in Morgan's decision to wind down "The Crown" with Elizabeth's complicity in the withering of the monarchy. But the season lacks narrative deftness and historic scale. The show's strongest episodes have revisited nation-defining events in Britain and beyond, such as the 1966 Aberfan mining disaster, which killed a hundred and forty-four Welsh villagers, and the Apollo 11 moon landing, which inflames Prince Philip's

ambivalence about trading in a life of adventure for one of royal comforts. But Season 5 focusses narrowly on the domestic drama inside the palace. The fall of the Soviet Union climaxes here in a marital spat between Elizabeth and Philip (Jonathan Pryce). The lingering image in the show's retelling of Hong Kong's "handover" is Charles (Dominic West) flying business class. An episode chronicling the transformation of a young Mohamed Al-Fayed (Amir El-Masry), from a street vender in Egypt to a flashy hotelier buying up property and prestige across Europe, nods to the demographic changes within the U.K. as a result of emigration from former British colonies. But Fayed is hardly a representative figure; his presence suggests that Morgan is comfortable addressing the racism of the British imperialist project only obliquely.

The idea that Elizabeth should have abdicated around the time of her annus horribilis—the year that three of her four children gave up on their marriages and a fire ravaged Windsor Castle—isn't new. This theme is explored in the 2006 film "The Queen," also written by Morgan, set in the months after Diana's death. One senses that Morgan may have said pretty much all he has to say—and more efficiently—in that movie. The one major revision is in the characterization of Prime Minister Tony Blair, who comes across as earnest and reasonable in "The Queen" but in "The Crown" is endowed with the soul and the style of a used-car salesman.

Charles, meanwhile, has only gained in Morgan's regard. Season 4 humanized the Prince without making him particularly sympathetic. Season 5 is practically pro-Charles propaganda. His relationship with Camilla Parker Bowles (Olivia Williams) is outrageously healthy. Even the reënactment of "Tampongate"—a leaked phone call in which Charles expresses a desire to be Camilla's tampon—is unexpectedly tender, restoring to the lovers' chat its jokey, self-deprecating devotion. Charles is an intellectually engaged, philanthropically minded, forward-looking leader—one who's game to boogie down in a suit with students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a school auditorium. That scene, which hinges on West's physical grace and charm, is an affront to common sense; it asks us to forget the Charles who has railed against population growth in the Global South and has his shoelaces ironed each morning. Morgan fails to reconcile the Prince's apparent aptness for the throne with his deep unpopularity among the public.

Unsurprisingly, the season's main villain is the media. If the episodes offer any indication of how the U.K. transformed during this period, it lies in the increasing viciousness of the press, as the explosion of commercial TV tests even the staid BBC's commitment to virtuous programming. Diana is easy prey for unsavory journalists, who scheme to take advantage of her loneliness. Like so many other women of tabloid interest in the nineties, Diana has benefitted from feminist revisionism. Season 4 painted her as a virgin sacrificed on the altar of good press. Season 5 takes a more he-said, she-said approach to her marriage. The depiction rings true, though it lacks the camp and chaos that enlivened the previous version. Sporting the harsh black eyeliner of the era, a muted Debicki is allowed to unleash the full Diana star power just twice: when wooing the unassuming surgeon Hasnat Khan (Humayun Saeed), and when she meets a now graying Fayed (Salim Daw), who remains determined to join the English élite, dragging his movie-producer son Dodi (Khalid Abdalla) with him.

Season 5 shies away from the inevitable; Dodi is smitten with a different spotlight-seeking blonde by its end. Because of that timidity (and the compressed time frame), the larger arc feels incomplete, structurally unsound. ("The Crown" will reportedly span six seasons, with the action ending in 2005.) Still, there's a satisfaction in watching the young, helpless Diana turn into a myopic, friendless antiheroine whose efforts to be understood can only take the form of vengeance. Over and over, her confessions become her family's humiliations. "There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded," she tells the journalist Martin Bashir (Prasanna Puwanarajah), the wounded softness of her voice belying the violence she unleashes on a wincing Charles and Camilla.

It's not just her husband who crumples whenever Diana opens her mouth. The whimpering heart of the season is her teen-age son, William (Senan West). Diana, paranoid that her phone calls are bugged, turns to him as a confidant, even when it's to gush about her latest boyfriend. William's pity for his mother is soon dwarfed by embarrassment. "Do you have to tell me these things?" he begs at one point. Given the unrelenting focus on the petty and the particular this season, viewers might ask Morgan the same question. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Inkoo Kang

By Kyle Chayka

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- The Beautiful, Brutal World of Bonsai

By Robert Moor

In the winter of 2002, a young American named Ryan Neil joined an unusual pilgrimage: he and several others flew to Tokyo, to begin a tour of Japan's finest collections of bonsai trees. He was nineteen, with an athlete's body and a sunny, symmetrical face. The next-youngest adult in the group was fifty-seven. Then, as now, rearing tiny trees in ornamental pots was not commonly considered a young man's hobby.

Neil had grown up in a small Colorado mountain town. For much of his youth, he was focussed on playing sports, especially basketball, which he approached with an almost clinical rigor: during high-school summer breaks, he'd wake up every day at five-thirty and attempt twelve hundred jump shots before going to the gym to lift weights. By his junior year, he was the best player on the team. By his senior year, he had torn one of his quadriceps —"It was hanging on by just a thread," he recalls—and was looking for a new obsession.

Like many Americans of his generation, Neil had discovered bonsai through the "Karate Kid" films. He was especially fond of the third movie in the series, which features dreamy shots of characters rappelling down a cliff face to collect a miniature juniper. In the films, the wise karate instructor, Mr. Miyagi, practices the art of bonsai, and in Neil's young mind it came to represent a romantic ideal: the pursuit of perfection through calm discipline. One day, after seeing bonsai for sale at a local fair, he rode his bike to the library, checked out every book on bonsai, and lugged them all home.

About a month later, he got his hands on a trade magazine, *Bonsai Today*, which featured an article about Masahiko Kimura, the so-called magician of bonsai, who is regarded by many enthusiasts as the field's most innovative living figure. (Kunio Kobayashi, one of Kimura's chief rivals at the time, called him "the kind of genius who comes along once every hundred years, or maybe more.") The article described how Kimura had transformed and refined a small juniper tree that had been collected in the wild. A scruffy, shapeless plant had become a cantilevered sculpture. As Neil saw it, Kimura had given the tree not just a new shape but a soul.

Near the end of high school, Neil laid out a meticulous long-term plan that would culminate in his travelling across the Pacific to apprentice under

Kimura, who was considered the toughest bonsai master in Japan. Neil knew that the work would not be easy. Bonsai apprenticeships could last anywhere between five and ten years. At the time, some fifty people had begun working under Kimura, but only five had completed the apprenticeship, all of them Japanese.

Neil went to college at California Polytechnic State University, in San Luis Obispo, where he majored in horticulture and studied Japanese. He helped take care of the university's bonsai collection and travelled around the West Coast to attend master classes with renowned practitioners. While other students were partying, he stayed home looking at bonsai blogs, or drove his pickup truck to remote mountain locations in search of wild miniature trees. "He was possessed," his father recalls.

Neil signed up for the tour of Japan during his sophomore year, and took a short leave from school. On the second day of the trip, the group visited Kimura's garden, in a rural area some thirty miles northwest of Tokyo. It was a cool, gray morning; Neil wore a hoodie. The group was met by one of Kimura's apprentices and ushered past rows of ancient and pristinely shaped bonsai into the back garden—the workshop—where few visitors were allowed.

Neil later likened the moment to peering into the mind of a mad genius. Hundreds of knee-high trees, in various states of arboreal surgery, were lined up on benches and beer crates. Custom-made power tools were scattered around the workshop, including a machine, used to sculpt trunks, that shot out tiny glass beads. Kimura was famed for his deft use of these devices to carve rippling torrents of *shari*—bone-white deadwood that is laced with thin veins of living wood.

That day, Kimura, who was then in his sixties, was working on an Ezo spruce with a spiky, half-dead trunk which was estimated to be a thousand years old. A photographer from the Japanese magazine *Kindai Bonsai* was present to document the process. Neil and the other visitors observed as Kimura, with the help of his lead apprentice, Taiga Urushibata, used guy wires and a piece of rebar to bend the trunk downward, compressing the tree—an act requiring a phenomenal balance of strength and finesse. Kimura misted the branches with water and wrapped them with thick copper wire.

He then bent the branches—some slightly upward, some downward—arranging the foliage into an imperfect dome, with small windows of light spaced throughout the greenery. He worked with relentless focus, but what amazed Neil most was the synchronicity of Kimura and Urushibata: whenever Kimura needed a tool, he would wordlessly extend his hand, and Urushibata would have the implement waiting for him.

After Kimura had made his design decisions, he left Urushibata to finish wiring the branches. The tour group moved to the front garden, but Neil lingered, watching the apprentice work. Urushibata, a stern young man with the pretty face and floppy hair of a J-pop idol, turned to Neil and spoke to him, in English.

"So you want to apprentice here?" Urushibata said.

"I do," Neil said.

"You should reconsider," Urushibata said, then turned his attention back to the spruce.

It's not difficult to create a tiny tree: you just need to restrict the roots and prune the branches. This has been known since at least the Tang dynasty in China, circa 700 *A.D*. One method was to plant a seedling in a dried orange peel and trim any roots that poked through. With a smaller root base, the tree cannot find the necessary nutrients to shoot upward, and thus remains small. In certain environments, like rocky cliffsides, this can occur naturally. The artistry, then, lies in shaping the tree. For most bonsai practitioners, "styling" a tree is a question of which branches to cut off and how to bend those which remain, using metal wire, so that the plant's over-all form elicits a feeling of something ancient and wild. The usual aim is not to imitate the profile of big trees—which are considered too messy to be beautiful—but to intensely *evoke* them. In culinary terms, bonsai is bouillon.

In the 1990 book "The World in Miniature," the Sinologist Rolf Stein notes that a range of early Taoist practices focussed on the magical power of tiny things. Taoist hermits, and also Buddhist monks, created miniature gardens as objects of contemplation, full of dwarfed plants, rock-size "mountains,"

and “lakes” the depth of teacups. These spaces provided a form of virtual travel, not unlike how books function for us today.

Taoism had a special reverence for fantastically gnarled trees, which, because their lumber is useless to woodcutters and carpenters, are often spared the axe, enduring for centuries. This aged look was incorporated into the aesthetic of miniaturized trees; after all, there is nothing magical about a tiny young tree.

The vogue for miniature gardens spread throughout China, and then, around the thirteenth century, to Japan. As Japan urbanized—by 1700, Tokyo, then known as Edo, was home to a million people, nearly twice the population of London—the miniaturization of nature gradually came to serve a more practical purpose: it allowed people to go outdoors without leaving their homes.

As the bonsai historian Hideo Marushima has noted, “The keeping of potted plants is not often a matter of public record,” making it difficult to trace the development of the bonsai form. But we do know, from historical woodblock prints of bonsai, that early artists favored twisty trunks and tufty foliage. Changes in fashion tended to hinge on particular species rather than on pruning styles: a fad for azaleas was followed by one for smooth-barked maples, then one for mandarin-orange trees. A craze for wild Ishizuchi shimpaku junipers caused their near-extinction.

In the early twentieth century, the widespread adoption of copper wire, which allowed artists to perform increasingly precise manipulations, led to more extreme stylization: some bonsai leaned far to one side, as if buffeted by harsh winds; some stood ramrod straight; some spilled over the side of the pot, as if cascading down a cliff; some resembled the sinuous ink stroke of a calligrapher. It could take decades, or longer, to create a trunk with the desired silhouette. Patience, care, and an invisibly light touch were the hallmarks of a bonsai master.

Kimura is sometimes said to have done for bonsai what Picasso did for painting—he shattered the art form and then reëngineered it. Using power tools, he performed transformations so drastic that the resulting shapes seemed almost impossible. Moreover, his new methods allowed him to

execute dramatic alterations in hours as opposed to over decades. Not surprisingly, his accelerated technique was admired and imitated throughout the West.

When Neil spoke of his desire to apprentice with Kimura, many American bonsai enthusiasts warned him that Kimura was harsh, uncouth, even cruel. But Neil wasn't easily intimidated, and he was dazzled by what he had seen.

He flew back home and resumed college. After enlisting a tutor in Japanese, he wrote a rudimentary letter to Kimura asking to become his apprentice. Kimura did not respond. So Neil wrote another letter, and, when that was also met with silence, another, and another. Writing each month, he sent some twenty letters without hearing back.

Shortly after Neil graduated, though, he received an elegantly handwritten note from Kimura. He was elated to learn that his request had been granted. Kimura wrote, "Training is of course about acquiring skills, but total apprehension of the spiritual aspect is of the utmost importance. It may be strict, but, if you dedicate yourself fully, it will most certainly be rewarding."

Masahiko Kimura was eleven years old when his father, a successful engineer, died suddenly. The family fell into poverty, and Kimura was forced to get a job as an errand boy. Life became "hell," he has said. It was 1951, and Japan was still recovering from the Second World War. College was out of reach. When he was fifteen, his mother announced that she was sending him to apprentice at Tōju-En, a famous bonsai garden in the Tokyo suburb of Ōmiya. It was the epicenter of the art form. She had noticed that he was good with his hands, and she wanted to give him a profession with a stable income.

For the next three years, Kimura worked seven days a week, from 8 *a.m.* to 11 *p.m.*, without a single day off. His master at Tōju-En, Motosuke Hamano, harshly corrected his every error; Kimura says that his master even instructed him in how to walk. Kimura was given five minutes to finish meals. He was allowed no girlfriends, no alcohol, and no cigarettes. At night, he practiced the guitar and dreamed of being a rock star.

Kimura completed his apprenticeship when he was twenty-six. Lacking the money to open a bonsai garden of his own, he instead started a plant shop. It was successful, and, after a decade or so, he had saved enough money to become a professional bonsai artist. Now married with two daughters, he was determined to catch up to his more privileged contemporaries. One day, after he'd spent seven hours shaping a shimpaku juniper, a thought occurred to him: Why doesn't anyone use power tools to accomplish this more quickly?

Around this time, a thirty-year-old engineer working at Toyota named Takeo Kawabe visited Kimura's bonsai garden, fell in love with the trees, and asked to become his apprentice. Together, they developed an arsenal of custom devices—sandblasters, small chainsaws, grinders—that made it easy to quickly shape deadwood into whorls and wisps. Using power tools, Kimura could hollow out thick roots, allowing him to coil them up in smaller pots; he could also bend stout trees, to make them appear smaller, or split them apart, to create forest-style plantings. Michael Hagedorn, an American bonsai artist who apprenticed in Japan, said of these advances, "It's similar to electrifying a guitar—the possibilities just go 3-D."

Because Kimura's shop could work faster, cheaper, and better than those of his competitors, his business flourished. He eventually made enough money to begin buying wild-collected miniature trees, called *yamadori*. Such trees, scarce in Japan, can be many hundreds of years old, and, once beautified by an artist, they can fetch astronomically high prices. (In the nineteen-eighties, at the peak of Japan's economic boom, a brilliantly styled *yamadori* might sell for more than a million dollars.) As Kimura's status rose, he recalls, he was also receiving "lots of criticism from bonsai V.I.P.s." Some detractors derided his use of power tools as "noisy bonsai"; others accused him of making "sculptures, not bonsai."



Masahiko Kimura, the so-called magician of bonsai, is widely regarded as the field's most innovative living figure.Photograph by Toshiki Senoue



A bonsai sculpted by Kimura, who uses power tools to perform transformations so drastic that the resulting shapes seem almost impossible.Photograph by Toshiki Senoue

In 1988, Kimura submitted a wild-collected shimpaku juniper, estimated to be seven hundred years old, to the Sakufu-ten, an annual bonsai competition whose top award is bestowed by Japan's Prime Minister. The tree, named "The Dance of a Rising Dragon," was Z-shaped, its bleached trunk rising in hard, nearly horizontal slants. Dead branches curled out in all directions, like dense smoke. Atop this luscious chaos sat a neat but asymmetrical dome of

foliage—a green cloud into which the dragon's head vanished. It is widely regarded as one of the finest bonsai ever created. Kimura won the top prize.

An air of genius now attended him. He had published a lushly illustrated book, "The Magical Technician of Contemporary Bonsai," which introduced his work to a global audience. The book included a manifesto in which Kimura declared, "We young bonsai artists must not be afraid to break with tradition. . . . If not, bonsai will evolve as a mere curiosity, but not an art."

Kimura began giving demonstrations in Western countries. He often theatrically revved his chainsaw onstage, and during question-and-answer sessions he could be shockingly blunt. An American bonsai aficionado recalls attending a demonstration in Anaheim, California, in which someone asked Kimura, through an interpreter, what he thought of American bonsai. Kimura responded in Japanese, and the Japanese-speaking members of the audience gasped. "Very nice," the interpreter translated, awkwardly. When audience members pushed him to reveal what Kimura had *really* said, they were stunned by the answer: "American bonsai is like maggots at the bottom of a toilet." (Kimura claims that this was a mistranslation.)

As Kimura's wealth grew, he adopted a Hemingwayesque life style. He drove American muscle cars and learned to pilot speedboats. He collected videos of Mike Tyson boxing matches. He hunted wild boar in Spain with the Spanish Prime Minister.

Kimura is now eighty-two. His wife died in 2009, and he continues to live with his daughters, who cook for him. He never drinks alcohol, but he is fond of going to nice restaurants and of singing karaoke with beautiful female companions. He smokes two packs of Winston cigarettes a day. A few years ago, he was given a diagnosis of lung cancer and had sixty per cent of one lung removed. He stopped smoking for a month, then resumed. He now appears to be in fine health.

A few years ago, I spoke with Kimura over a bento-box lunch in his sunny office. The walls were lined with framed photographs of his many award-winning trees. He wore a lavender dress shirt with "M. Kimura" embroidered on the breast pocket, in light-blue thread. His palms were thick, and he had a pianist's long fingers, his nails perfectly trimmed and clean.

His face, up close, was slightly forlorn, with deep-set eyes and jutting cheekbones. In rare moments of levity, his eyes crinkled and his smile revealed a gold molar.

During the interview, he went through ten cigarettes, seeming to enjoy the ritual of lighting up as much as the experience of smoking: he often gently stubbed one out half finished. He laid the butts in a neat row, like timber, on a large crystal ashtray. (As with many Japanese bonsai professionals, he is uncommonly fastidious: when I had dinner with him later that week, he sent back a plate of negitoro rolls for being improperly sliced.)

At one point, when Kimura was discussing his revolutionary techniques, he pulled out a book and showed me an image of what appeared to be two dramatically different trees. My interpreter, a bonsai writer named Makiko Kobayashi, explained that they were before-and-after shots of the same tree. “Can you guess how he used his magic on this original tree?” Kobayashi said.

I shook my head.

“Guess,” she said.

Pointing to some foliage, I said, “Did he graft this on here?”

Kimura shook his head.

Pointing to a branch, I said, “Did he bring this over here?”

Kimura chuckled, took the book, and slowly turned it upside down. He had somehow managed to grow roots out of a live vein of wood on one of the living branches, potted it upside down, and then carved the exposed roots so that they resembled dead branches.

We left the office, and Kimura gave me a tour of his garden, which is filled with finished bonsai. (He refused to show me his workshop.) The garden was next to a dark pond haunted by huge albino grass carp. He smoked as he moved from tree to tree, stroking the foliage and plucking out dead needles. Of late, the fashion in bonsai has shifted to larger specimens, to accommodate the tastes of wealthy Chinese buyers, who display their prized

trees in outdoor gardens rather than inside their homes, as Japanese people do. Kimura's work, which is monumental by bonsai standards—some trees reached as high as my sternum, with trunks nearly as wide as my waist—was well suited to this trend, and he had profited greatly from it. He told me that he had recently sold a tree to the C.E.O. of a major Chinese tech company. "To them, a million dollars is like a pack of cigarettes," he said.

Kimura kept wandering through the garden, but I fell behind, pausing to examine each of his creations. When you look at a traditional bonsai tree, you can climb into it with your eyes and feel the peace of a late-summer afternoon, or the bright chill of a morning sea breeze. When you look at a Kimura tree, you enter a whirlwind. The tree moves in ways your eye cannot follow, leaving you dazed and a bit uneasy. Neil likens the feeling to that of pondering the vastness of outer space.

Neil, having finally received the go-ahead from Kimura, flew back to Japan in August, 2004, two months after graduating from college. He went to Kimura's garden straight from the airport. When Kimura discovered that Neil's grasp of Japanese was considerably worse than was implied by his laboriously written letters, his manner became brusque. "Apprentices are like dogs," Kimura warned him. "I don't care where they sleep or what they eat, so long as they show up every day." (Kimura denies saying this.)

Neil soon found a furnished apartment, which was so small that he felt like an ogre in it—his feet hung over the edge of the bed. (He is five feet eleven.) For a month, he did little more than practice speaking Japanese and sitting in *seiza* fashion—his shins pressed flat against the floor, his sit bones on his heels. He found the position excruciating.

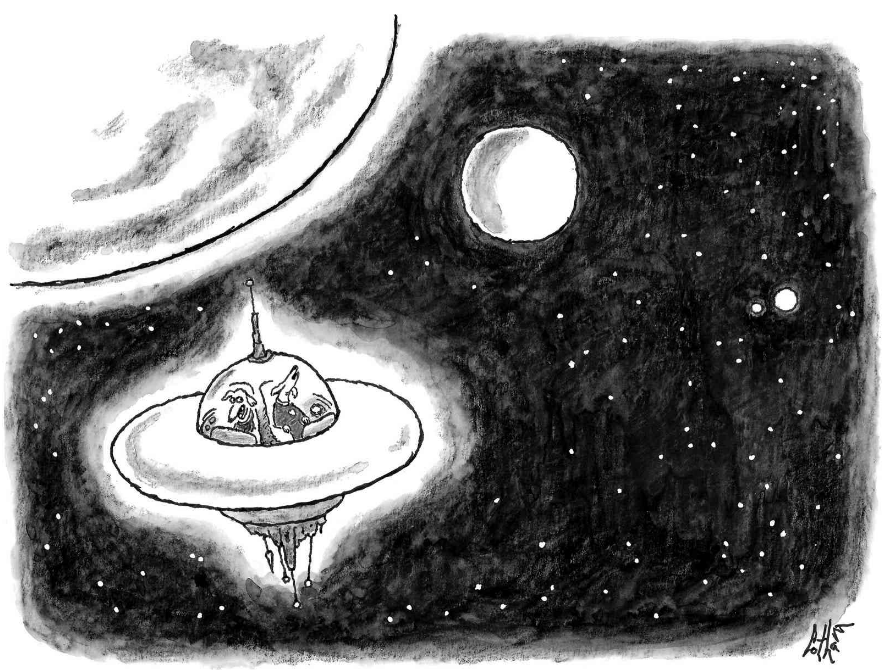
Neil showed up to his first day of work three and a half hours early, waited outside until 8 *a.m.*, then entered the garden. There were no other apprentices around. Adrenaline fizzed in his veins. When Kimura finally emerged from his house, at ten o'clock, he did not acknowledge Neil. He simply grabbed a hose and started watering trees.

Neil, jittery and sweaty, walked behind him, doing his best to keep the hose from kinking, while Kimura watered the entire collection. Kimura then picked up a white pine, carried it inside, and began picking off dead needles.

He turned to Neil and said, “Can you do this?” Neil said yes. Kimura went back outside and returned with a juniper. He started using a gouge to find a vein of live wood that ran up the trunk. He said to Neil, “Can you do *this*?” Neil had never done it before. He did his best.

In the afternoon, Kimura’s other apprentices appeared, including Taiga Urushibata—the young man Neil had observed on his tour two years earlier. The apprentices, five in all, had been given the morning off, a rare treat. When Kimura stood up to leave, Urushibata grabbed Neil. Gesturing toward Kimura, he commanded, “Say thank you.” Neil said, “*Sensei, arigatō gozaimasu*”—“Thank you, teacher.” Urushibata smacked Neil on the back of the head. “He’s not your teacher,” he said. “He’s your *oyakata*”—your master.

Kimura said of Neil, in Japanese, “He’s been working on that juniper all day, and he doesn’t understand anything. This kid is no good.”



“There’s no need to howl at every moon we pass by.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

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Neil was crushed. But he returned the next day, and the next. His main duties for the first few months were to water the garden and to keep the workshop meticulously clean. Kimura frequently used white rags to wipe black sap off his hands, and Neil was told that whenever Kimura picked up

one it must be spotless. Neil estimates that he washed two to three hundred rags each day. He had heard that this tedious phase of his apprenticeship might last two years.

A servile style of apprenticeship is increasingly rare in modern Japan. But, before the industrial age, it was the norm throughout many parts of Asia and Europe. Boys were apprenticed to tradesmen and craftsmen who taught them, reared them, and exploited them. The first years of an apprenticeship were typically devoted to menial labor. Francisco Goya spent four years grinding pigments and making copies before he was allowed to begin his own compositions. Even today, apprentice sushi chefs might spend two years mopping floors before they are allowed to cook the rice.

A month into Neil's apprenticeship, he was called over to the turntable where Kimura worked. Kimura, who was wiring the branches of a white pine, asked Neil, "Can you do this?" Neil said yes—even though he couldn't. Properly wiring a branch with copper wire, especially on an old tree, is surprisingly difficult, and if it's done improperly it can scar the bark or kill the branch.

Neil took the tree back to his turntable and stared at it for a while. Finally, he admitted to Urushibata that he couldn't wire the tree.

"Then why did you tell him you could?" Urushibata asked.

Neil shrugged and apologized.

"Americans are so arrogant!" Urushibata shouted. "In Japan, if you can't do something, you say, 'I can't.' You don't say, 'I can'!"

Neil went to Kimura, and, apologizing, admitted that he didn't know how to wire the tree.

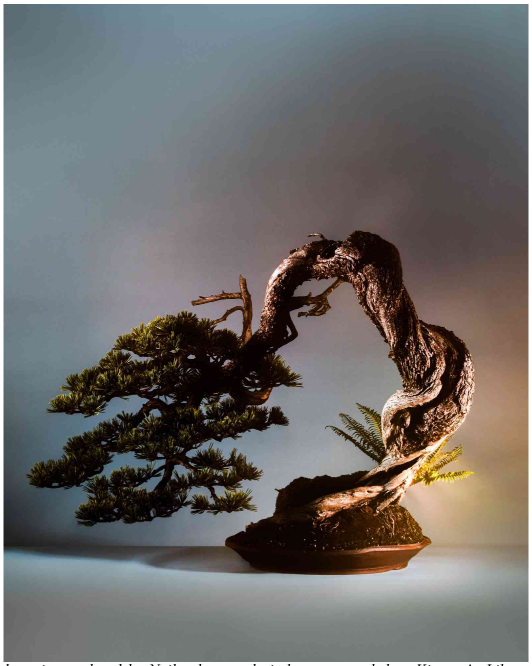
"I know you don't," Kimura said. "If you could wire this tree, you wouldn't be here." He went on, "But you said you could, and now it's in front of you. So wire it." Neil spent the rest of the afternoon wiring the tree while Kimura looked on, pointing out all the things he was doing wrong. But, when Neil had finished wiring the apex of the tree, Kimura lingered over it. "That's not

bad," he finally said, nodding. From that day forward, Neil was allowed to wire trees.

Neil worked seven days a week in Kimura's garden, from 8 *a.m*. to 11 *p.m*. He was given a meagre salary—just enough to cover rent and food. He almost always felt out of place. Kimura complained that Neil took up too much space and sweated too much. (That summer was one of the hottest on record in Japan; in the first three months of his apprenticeship, Neil lost thirty-five pounds.) He sometimes grunted when lifting a heavy object, prompting Kimura to shout, "You're too loud!" Once, a visitor remarked approvingly that Kimura had a strong apprentice in Neil. "Yeah, he's strong, but he's a little too Rambo," Kimura said, sighing.

Neil was often asked to hold heavy trees while Kimura thinned out roots and live veins. Neil watched Kimura's every move. If Urushibata caught him doing so, he would flick Neil in the forehead, saying, "Your job isn't to look—your job is to hold." Neil learned that an apprentice is rarely given overt lessons; he is expected to watch out of the corner of his eye and "steal" his master's secrets. Whenever Kimura criticized him, which was often, Neil thanked him. After work, when the other apprentices were sleeping, Neil would stay up until two or three in the morning, practicing wiring skills in his apartment. He later learned that, at night, Kimura often drove down Neil's street on his way to sing karaoke, and would see him working by the window.

In the morning, Neil would bring a sample of his wiring to the workshop and ask Kimura to critique it. Neil recalls Kimura once saying, "I've never even seen anyone do something this terrible. I would have to *try* to do something this terrible. Why are you so stupid?"



A limber pine sculpted by Neil, whose style is less groomed than Kimura's. Like many bonsai artists, Neil uses copper wire to manipulate branches, but he is careful not to mar a "natural sculpture" for the sake of convention.Photograph by Suzanne Saroff for The New Yorker

Neil was even more disheartened by the abuse that the senior apprentices inflicted on those below them: slapping them, striking them with sticks, even punching them in the face. On one occasion, he saw Urushibata repeatedly kick another apprentice, who was balled up in the fetal position. (Urushibata says that he "is sorry for using unreasonable corporal punishment.") During these beatings, Neil recalls, Kimura often watched and laughed, exclaiming, "I bet you won't forget *that* lesson!" (Kimura says this form of "strict discipline" is no longer practiced at his garden. Until recently, such physical punishment, or *taibatsu*, was common for apprentices in Japan. It was also once common in the West: until the twentieth century, apprentices in Europe and North America were regularly whipped and caned.)

Kimura shaped his apprentices the way he shaped trees: mercilessly, radically. He pitted the apprentices against one another and poked at their insecurities. Neil has never been able to watch "Whiplash," the 2014 film about a sadistic jazz conductor who pushes a young drummer to practice until his hands bleed, because the story line is "hauntingly" reminiscent of his experience as a bonsai apprentice. "That kind of mental warfare—that was my apprenticeship," Neil said. He was often criticized for mistakes that he hadn't actually made, and he was never complimented on his achievements. He learned that the only way to survive was to switch off his

emotions, store away his ego, and give himself over to predicting and fulfilling Kimura's needs. Neil's parents, who saw him only three times during the apprenticeship, began to notice that his personality was changing in alarming ways. "He got very hard," his father recalls.

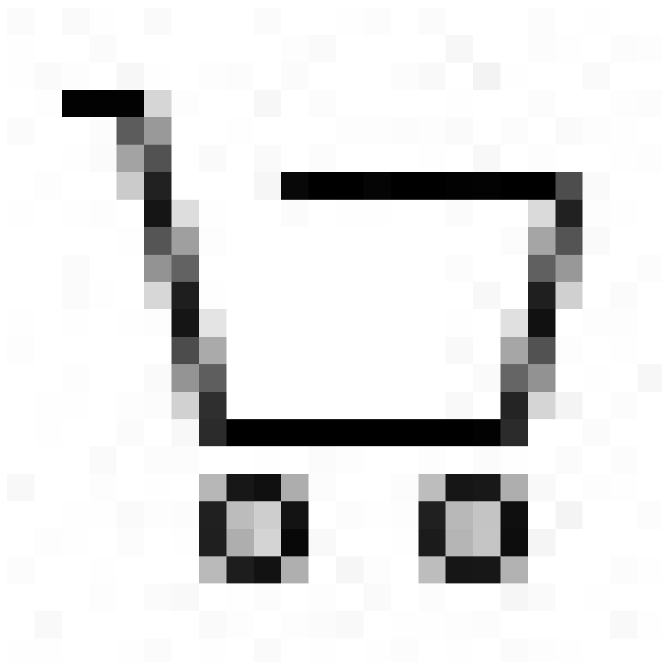


"Finally, I have a walk-in kitchen."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

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During Neil’s third year as an apprentice, Kimura returned from an auction with an expensive white pine, and asked Neil to style it. “Don’t make it worth less than what I bought it for,” Kimura warned. Neil recalls being frozen with fear. “I’m looking at it, and I’m, like, ‘If this were my tree, I would want to do X, Y, and Z—but I don’t think he would like that.’ So I styled the tree as I thought he would approve of.” Kimura, however, told him that the styling was unsatisfactory. “For literally three hours, he just told me what a pile of shit I was,” Neil recalled. “But the interesting thing was that he changed the tree in all the ways that I’d initially thought I should handle it. I recognized that if I was going to survive this apprenticeship, mentally and emotionally, I’d have to do what I thought was right.” One paradox of being an apprentice is that you are expected to learn how to re-create your master’s style. But a true master does not copy anyone’s style—he creates freely and fearlessly. In order to truly copy a master, an apprentice must break free.

One by one, the other apprentices in Kimura’s workshop graduated or quit. In total, sixteen people quit while Neil was working in the garden. He eventually found himself the only apprentice left. For nine months, he did the work of five apprentices—including watering twelve hundred bonsai up to three times a day. As Neil put it to me, it was “execute, execute, execute,

all day long—it was so overwhelming that, if you stopped to think about it, you'd lose your mind." Neil said of Kimura, "You would think that he'd be, like, 'Oh, shit, I can't let this guy quit, too.' But he was harder on me than at any time in my apprenticeship."

One winter day, Neil was standing at the old stone sink outside the workshop washing rags; he had accidentally broken off the branch of an important tree, and Kimura was upset with him. Neil looked up from his task and saw an electrical conduit, over the sink, bearing a small logo: "*mirai*." (Mirai Industry is a major producer of metal plating in Japan.) He realized that, even after staring at the word every day for years, he didn't know what it meant. That night, he went home and looked up *mirai*. He learned that it means "the future," but, as opposed to its near-synonym, *shōrai*, *mirai* connotes a far-off future. Neil marks this as a turning point in his life as an apprentice: "The whole time I've been washing these rags, I've been telling myself this isn't fair, and I'm doing the best that I can—but I really wasn't. There was another level—there was another gear that I was resisting. I confronted that that night." He took *mirai* as his personal motto, a reminder to always reach for perfection, even as the possibility perpetually recedes from one's grasp. To an outsider, it might seem that the apprentice was merely absorbing the self-punishing pathology of his master, but Neil sees the moment as one in which he went from being servile to being self-directed.

In 2007, Neil became Kimura's senior apprentice, responsible not just for the garden but also for training newer apprentices—whom, he admits, he treated as harshly as Urushibata had treated him. "I definitely hit people," he recalls. "I was instructed to inflict what Mr. Kimura would call 'memorable pain.' "

Kimura eventually entrusted Neil to fashion trees for top competitions. They were all billed as Kimura's designs, but Neil was given his own spread in *Kindai Bonsai* magazine—a rare honor for a Westerner. During all their time together, Kimura never said whether he was proud of Neil, as a person or as an artist. However, Kimura's friend Massimo Bandera, an Italian bonsai artist, told me that Kimura had confided to him that Neil was his "best pupil of all time."

Neil ultimately apprenticed with Kimura for six years. He would have stayed for a seventh, but his visa application was rejected. Kimura took the news calmly. “You’re beyond the time to go home,” he told him. “It’s time to leave.”

Neil returned to America in April, 2010. As part of his duties as a former apprentice, he periodically went back to Japan to help Kimura prepare trees for major competitions. On these visits, Kimura showed him none of the warmth that one might expect from a mentor. Neil’s final visit to the garden was to help Kimura get ready for the World Bonsai Convention of 2017, which was held outside Tokyo. He hadn’t seen his master in three years.

“Good morning,” Neil said, in Japanese.

“It’s been a long time,” Kimura replied. Looking Neil up and down, he added, “You’ve gotten fat.” Then Kimura glanced around and said, “The garden is dirty.”

Neil picked up a broom and began to sweep.

The advantage of having been trained by a genius, even a cruel one, is that you glean some aspects of the master’s skills. The downside is that you are forever after haunted by the fear that you will remain a mere shadow of the master. According to Neil, Kimura often complained that none of his former apprentices had developed an original style.

Urushibata, who is now one of the top bonsai artists in Japan, told me, “Of course, the basis is Kimura’s style, but we have to grow beyond Kimura.” Urushibata has experimented with such novelties as potted trees designed to float on water, but when we spoke he expressed little satisfaction with his progress. The question of how to forge a fresh path within the rigid confines of Japanese bonsai seemed to physically pain him.

Neil returned home with a distinct advantage: he felt free to break as many rules as he wanted, creating forms of bonsai suited to American species, American culture, and American landscapes. Moreover, unlike in Japan, where most of the great *yamadori* were collected long ago, America has a

vast wealth of wild miniature trees. Neil realized that he could get all the raw materials he needed to push the art form in fresh directions.

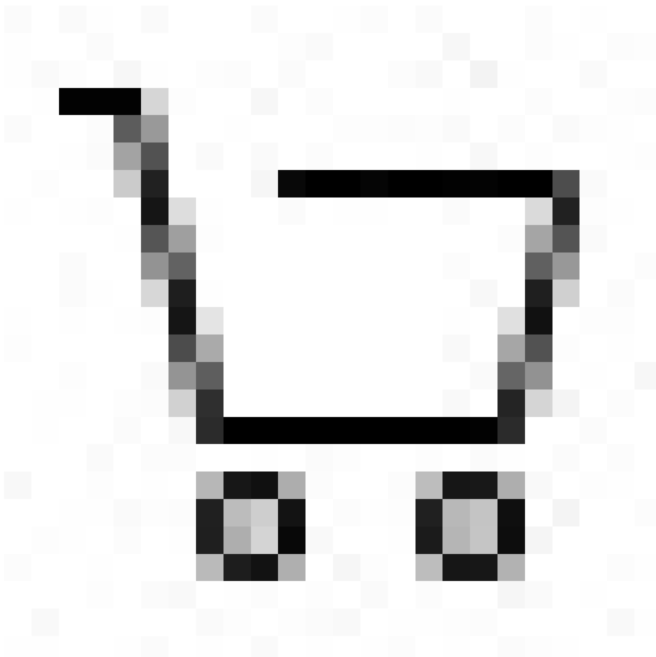


“She loves opera.”
Cartoon by Sam Gross

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In college, Neil had heard stories about an Oregon man, Randy Knight, who regularly foraged in the Colorado Rockies for wild masterpieces. Neil befriended him, and Knight began selling him ancient trees that, by bonsai standards, were too hulking and ungainly for most artists to even contemplate working with. In 2010, Neil moved into Knight's home, where he slept on a couch and shaped trees in the garage, warming the space with a wood-burning stove. He sometimes stayed up for thirty-six hours straight, drinking coffee, dipping tobacco, and working in a state of hyper-focus while snow fell outside. Neil relished his new freedom, but, after being told "how to *be* for six years" in Japan, he also found it daunting.

Eventually, Neil bought a plot of land outside Portland which had good sun exposure, pristine groundwater, and a run-down cabin. The area's ample rainfall and mild winters were ideal for growing conifers, and it lies at the crossroads of the plant-obsessed hipsters of Oregon and the design-obsessed techies of Seattle and Silicon Valley.

Neil named his business Bonsai Mirai. His signature species were Rocky Mountain junipers and ponderosa pines. From the start, he pushed the limits of design, making trees so asymmetrical that they toppled over, or putting relatively big trees in tiny pots, which required him to water them five times a day. In his determination to defy clichés, he killed some valuable trees,

including a thousand-year-old, many-armed Rocky Mountain juniper that he called the Kraken. He felt such losses deeply. “The interesting thing about bonsai is that it has to function,” Neil said. A tree that doesn’t function either dies or ages hideously. As Troy Cardoza, who worked at Bonsai Mirai, once said, “It’s an evolving art form. It grows. It’s not as though the Mona Lisa will start getting wrinkles under her eyes.”

Like Kimura, Neil enjoys working with unusually large, fantastically tangled material. But Neil has a less groomed style than that of his mentor. He proudly does things that Kimura would never do, and refrains from doing things that Kimura would always do. One of Neil’s most celebrated trees, a subalpine fir, has a sharp spire of deadwood rising high above the foliage mass, like a skyscraper poking through clouds. “I feel like that’s the kind of thing where Mr. Kimura would cut it off, so that it would fit into convention,” Neil told me. “And it’s, like, *No*—you basically just defamed this piece of natural sculpture.”

Neil pointedly avoids power tools; he never grinds or sandblasts. This leaves the grain with a nuanced texture laden with spidery fissures. When you lean in close to a classic Kimura tree, in each carefully sculpted curve of the deadwood you perceive the handiwork of the artist. When you lean in to one of Neil’s trees, you marvel at the handiwork of nature.

Some of Neil’s boldest choices were invisible to me until he explained them. At the U.S. National Bonsai Exhibition, in Rochester, New York, he submitted a limber pine that had the slouchy insouciance of a young Joni Mitchell. Its crown leaned toward the viewer, and its main branch reached down across the trunk—typically considered a design flaw. “That branch crossing over the trunk is like a middle finger to traditional bonsai,” Neil said. “Even though the tree is very simple and very beautiful, it’s a little bit, like, ‘Shove it up your ass.’ ”

Neil initially tried to transplant the unforgiving model of Kimura’s garden to American soil. It didn’t take. Neil told me that, when he treated his first apprentices as harshly as Kimura had treated him, “they would just leave—they were, like, ‘You’re kind of a dick.’ ” Neil realized that they were right, and he subsequently softened. J. P. Hoareau, Neil’s former apprentice at

Mirai, told me, “It was difficult for him to find the balance between being a friend and being a master.”

In the past decade, Neil has adopted a more genial approach to teaching bonsai: in addition to in-person classes, he has launched an online tutorial service, which has thousands of subscribers. He is also developing an app that dispenses personalized advice, depending on the species you own and the climate where you live. It sends little reminders when it’s time to repot or trim a tree.

Every Tuesday, he live-streams a bonsai-shaping demonstration. On a hot summer day, I watched him recording one at the back of his workshop, with the help of several employees. He’d decided to shape a large Scotch pine into a traditional style known as “informal upright.” (Neil likes to show off the fact that, despite his avant-garde leanings, he can perfectly execute classical designs.) With a white towel draped around his neck, he sat on a stool beside the tree, assessing its strengths and weaknesses. Then, with little hesitation, he used pruning shears to make what he called “beautiful clean cuts.” As he lopped off branch after branch, he said, “Boom! Boom! Boom!,” like a TV chef tossing ingredients into a hot skillet. He explained his decisions in terms of energy and healing: the needles were “solar panels”; each cut created a “wound.” Soon, the branches on the floor outnumbered those on the tree. His triceps flaring, Neil used concave cutters to remove a chunk of wood from the trunk, thus creating a tapered appearance—a coveted sign of old age. He observed that the tree, once unruly-looking, now had a soothing effect on the viewer. “Traditional design is literally like going to the Hilton and having somebody feed you room service and having a super fluffy bed,” he said. “It makes us feel very centered and calm when we look at it. That’s why I struggle with it so much. I don’t feel centered and calm *ever*.”

An essential peculiarity of bonsai is that, though many hobbyists take it up for its serene and meditative qualities, being a bonsai professional—caring for hundreds or thousands of trees at a time, teaching classes, training apprentices, managing a business—involves never-ending stress. Nearly all bonsai professionals work seven days a week; one day of vacation could result in a garden full of dead trees. Urushibata, the former Kimura apprentice, once told me, “My dream is to just lie down on the grass.”

Neil, now in his early forties, had chronic back pain and was developing arthritis in his fingers. His financial situation, he told me, was "hand to mouth," and the chaotic nature of climate change was making it harder to keep his prized trees alive. The real benefit of his apprenticeship with Kimura, Neil said, was that it had given him an honest glimpse of what it means to be a bonsai professional—and it had hardened him enough to handle that life. Neil believes that this hardness, more than anything else, is the "spiritual aspect" of bonsai that Kimura once spoke of.

Still, Kimura's training has left Neil with emotional scars. "He fucked me up bad," Neil told me. He has been in therapy for years, attempting to root out the odd mixture of insecurity and callousness that Kimura ingrained in him. During his six years in Japan, Neil was prohibited from dating. When he returned home, he began a relationship with a former schoolmate, and they had a son, but before long they broke up, leaving him a single father with a seven-day-a-week job and perilous finances.

I asked Neil if, given this fallout, he regretted his time in Japan. He said that he would certainly not be eager to repeat the experience. But, he added, "if somebody was, like, 'We're going to rewind time, and you get to choose whether you become the person that you are today, or potentially be a less informed, less durable person over the course of the journey that you've taken, do you want the easier path?,' I'd say, 'No—give me the harder path.' "

A bonsai's beauty, Neil noted, can often be traced to its struggle to stay alive. A young tree tends to be symmetrical, with an upright posture and no scars. "All of a sudden, boulders fall on it, snow crushes it, wind rips its branches off," Neil said. "The older it gets, the more asymmetrical it gets, because of the random acts and events that the natural environment is imposing on the tree. Humans are virtually no different." ♦

By David Remnick

By Ted Geltner

By Lauren Collins

By Sarah Larson

Poems

- **“Ancestral Poem”**
- **“Easement”**

By Jaswinder Bolina

Audio: *Read by the author.*

And so we settled upon the shore
of a nasally Midwestern sea
governed by a moon that hung
like a medal we'd won above
the subdivision. Evenings,
the starlings made an ecstatic
calligraphy against the gloam,
landed upon the slack, black
wires, our antique telephony
rippling between their toes.
From my vantage in a second-story
window of the split-level ranch
where we kept our things,
I could see some moths mistake
the neon heat of a Blockbuster
Video sign to the west for home,
your babaji watering the impatiens
in their beds beneath a local cosmos.
Crisscross of the pinkening contrails,
your bibiji nursing her twilight
chai in a patio chair. She said a thing
then that made them laugh, the clouds
like painted bulls tumbling across a cave wall
in this, the only known record of these events.

This is drawn from "English as a Second Language and Other Poems."

By David Remnick

By Ted Geltner

By Joshua Rothman

By Lauren Collins

By **Jameson Fitzpatrick**

Audio: *Read by the author.*

I didn't know what to call the sudden
green glimpse from the road, lush
but low, from which rose a line of

utility poles, all in pairs, so that together
they gave the impression of a long
succession of gates leading somewhere

greener still. This was a common feature
of the landscape against which I grew up.
But this one, loved, because it was

on the way to my boyfriend's,
two towns over, where it brought me such
pleasure to drive, singing along to the songs

we made ours. Hours into months.
For an anniversary he gave me a Polaroid
of this place I'd point out, though the curve

was steep there and the glimpse brief.
How he'd taken it he'd never tell.
Once dumped, I cut the photo up.

This was what is meant by "a lifetime ago."
That time before you I call my childhood,
when there were many boyfriends to lose

and the songs I played were not yet a portal
to anything. Now, coming up on a view
of a much sharper drop, I'm surprised

to think of him only fondly and in passing.
To give you permission to cut through me,
as needed, on your way down to sweetness.

By Glenn Eichler

By Deborah Treisman

By Peter C. Baker

By Catherine Mevs

Profiles

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Lyrics from Taylor Swift’s Future Midnights**

By Cora Frazier

Night Wander

I stood in the hall / maternity-pants elastic worn thin / The night-light in the bathroom glowed / I whispered into the dark, “I am here.” / You kicked me in the bladder / and then ghosted

“C”-Work

I gave my abs for you / lying marooned on the bed with swollen breasts, refused / You only want the bottle / in the hand of your dad / I only ever expected a thank-you

First Memory

My love, will you remember / the first time you saw me wear shoes? / My love, will you remember / the elevator doors opening, too? / My love, will you remember / my face above the stroller / adjusting the pumpkin hat on your head? / My love, will you remember / when you looked up at me and grinned / because you had just pooped? / My love, I will

February 3, 2025

When you met my ex in Whole Foods / you called him Dada and tugged at my shirt / revealing my old bra / You’ve known since February that I loved you like a son / because you are my son / my son / my son

. . . Dinosaur

A love that makes the impossible possible / a train to a ferry to *Ikea* / to replace your *Jättelik* doll / the last one in the tri-state area / The babysitter put the dirty dishes back into the drawer / You screamed when I turned off “*Paw* Patrol” / and told me that brontosauruses suck

Stab Me in the Drop-Off Line

Still groggy from Ambien / I put on leggings and walk you to school / You tell your friend Zeus / “That’s my mom, but she usually wears dresses.” / And it isn’t even true

Believe You

Just us / the humidifier glugs / I tell you again the Pumpkin Goblin won’t bite your feet / but you still cry beneath your poster of Vin Diesel / Baby, what did I do / to lose your trust?

It’s Your Future

No curfew, but you take advantage / vomiting in the sink of our renovated master bathroom / “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” you scream / You were supposed to take the SAT this morning / I feed you Coke and Advil / On Instagram, you say I ruined your life / Just like all my haters

Expulsion

You were nineteen / I was fifty-five / You and your roommate / in the junior common room gyrate / rapping under the name BreastWrk / setting off indoor fireworks / And you didn’t even / ask for my help / So don’t come home to me, baby / when you are expelled

Mom, a Pop Mogul

A memoir, and I’m so proud / I preordered enough copies to fill the Nashville library / Page five and you’re already calling me “touchy” / even though I still have all your old onesies / I can’t read another word / How could you make art / about people you love? / How could you make art / about people you love? ♦

By Isaac Chotiner

By Charles Bethea

By Paolo Pasco

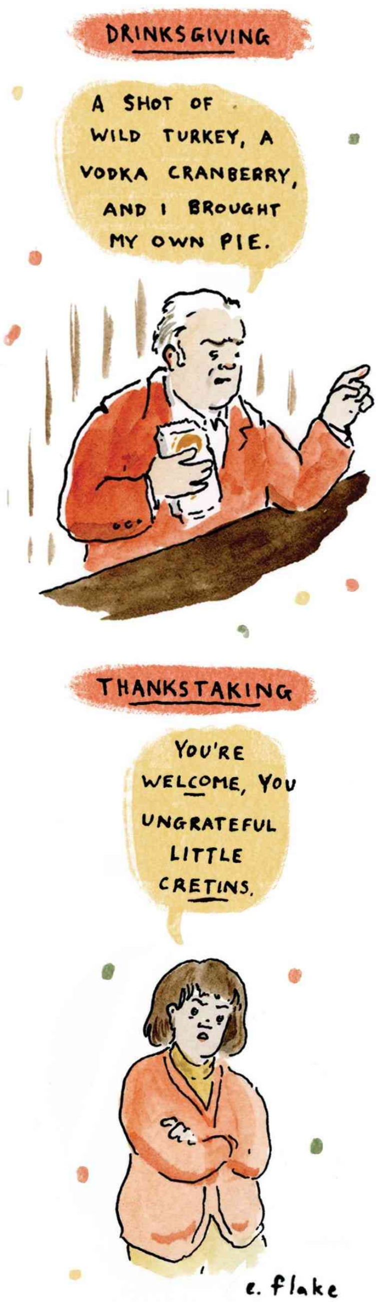
By Matt Jackson

Sketchpad

- **Thanksgiving Getting Stale? Try These Alternatives!**

By [Emily Flake]





By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Jia Tolentino

By Joshua Rothman

By Patricia Marx

Tables for Two

- Playful Nostalgia and Honed Classics, at S&P Lunch

By Hannah Goldfield

“I’m looking for that old New York flavor that you don’t see anymore,” an anonymous narrator says in a YouTube clip entitled “Eisenberg’s Sandwich Shop - Open 1929 and still going strong.” In shaky footage, filmed in 1991 at the Jewish-style lunch counter near the Flatiron Building, a couple of good-natured soda jerks indulge questions about their work between answering calls on a rotary phone and shovelling ice into plastic cups, dutifully maintaining a disappearing way of life.

Thirty years later, the rotary phone needs a new ringer and the place is under new management, and yet: the prognosis for that old New York flavor is good. If Eisenberg’s never achieved the international acclaim of, say, Katz’s or the Carnegie Deli, it earned a cult following with its tuna melts and matzo-ball soup, and, more important, by never seeming to change a smidge. When, in 2021, the building’s landlord sought a new tenant to carry the torch (the previous one reportedly defaulted on the rent), dozens applied. From among them, the finest possible victors emerged: Eric Finkelstein and Matt Ross, the sandwich experts and playful nostalgists behind Court Street Grocers and the HiHi Room.

With their latest venture, Finkelstein and Ross are proving to be gifted preservationists as well as savvy restaurateurs. For legal reasons, they had to drop Eisenberg’s as a name, but historical research solved the problem: before it was Eisenberg’s, it was briefly called S&P Sandwich Shop, after the founders. This reinstatement is just one example of the pair’s deft efforts to distill the shop to its essence. They rehired long-term staff members, such as Jodi Freedman-Viera, who had worked the register for around fifteen years. They spruced up the interior, but not so much that it doesn’t look and feel just as it ever did: comfortable and clean yet decidedly worn around the edges, the original forty-foot counter intact and lined with vinyl swivel stools. The menu has been pared down, but it still feels encyclopedic in the tradition of a short-order diner, featuring roughly three dozen sandwiches, including hamburgers. The classics have not been updated so much as painstakingly honed. “It’s like, in your brain, when you eat something, what you want it to taste like,” Ross told me recently. “That’s our goal.”

I’d like, genuinely, to eat at S&P every day. Some of my happiest moments of late have been spent marvelling at the glory of dishes I’d taken for

granted: a ripe half cantaloupe, deseeded and filled with cottage cheese, a bowl of lightly dressed iceberg lettuce topped with a scoop of egg salad, cream cheese and chopped green olives (a surprisingly thrilling combination) on squishy white bread. I dug into chicken liver with saltines; I sipped a cherry-lime rickey so sweet that my teeth ached. I ordered my first, but certainly not my last, Dusty Miller, a remarkably unphotogenic sundae, featuring vanilla ice cream, a dollop of marshmallow fluff, chocolate syrup, and malt powder. One afternoon, I was moved nearly to tears by the sight of a bespectacled middle-aged gentleman enjoying, solo, a towering slice of carrot cake and a cup of tea while crocheting.



The new proprietors have resisted the temptation to elevate any of the humble offerings, focussing instead on honing classics to their purest essence.

Look up to the left while sitting at the counter and you'll see, where the ceiling drops, a tiny, ancient-looking door with a sign that reads "no admittance." I'd been to Eisenberg's many times; how had I never noticed that before? The answer was that it was only recently installed, a cheeky design flourish, to cover an air-conditioning hatch. "A number of people have said, 'I'm so glad you guys left that door there,' " Finkelstein told me, laughing. "On Instagram, people have posted things like, 'So glad they kept the cottage fries,' or 'The pastrami is exactly how I remember it.' " The cottage fries are new to the menu; the pastrami is sourced from a different producer. "It's really interesting talking to people who have spent a lot of time in that space, much more than we ever did, and how much information

is just completely misremembered," Ross said. "Everyone has this memory, and we're fulfilling that memory in a weird sort of way." *(Sandwiches $6-$19.)* ♦

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Patricia Marx

By Patricia Marx

The Current Cinema

- **Steven Spielberg's "The Fabelmans" and the Madness of Love**

By Anthony Lane

A Roman Catholic kid of my acquaintance, on his first trip to the cinema, paused to genuflect in the aisle before taking his seat. A perfectly understandable mistake. The same kind of awe consumes Sammy Fabelman (Mateo Zoryon Francis-DeFord), a young Jewish boy, as he yields to the ineffable mystery of the big screen, at the start of Steven Spielberg's "The Fabelmans." No bending of the knee, but Sammy has never seen a film before, and his eyes widen, in delicious dread, at the sight of a train crash in "The Greatest Show on Earth." For him, I reckon, that could be the title of every movie ever made.

It is 1952, and Sammy has been taken to the pictures, in New Jersey, by his parents, Burt (Paul Dano) and Mitzi (Michelle Williams). For Hanukkah, he gets a train set, and he promptly tries to re-create, in miniature, the disaster that he saw in "The Greatest Show on Earth," using Burt's cine-camera. Three things are worth noting here. One, Sammy makes a pretty good job of it, igniting a fascination with filmmaking that will take fire throughout his childhood and beyond. Two, Mitzi, who instinctively fathoms his reasons for committing the crash to celluloid ("He's trying to get some kind of control over it"), suggests that they keep the project to themselves, without telling Burt. Such is the initial hint of a closeness, between mother and son, that will acquire the breathless intensity of a secret. And, three, given that "The Fabelmans" is, to an extent, a semi-disguised autobiography, is it O.K. to glance ahead to the gonzo train wreck in J. J. Abrams's "Super 8" (2011), on which Spielberg was a producer? Could it be that his personal past has not merely fed his own work but rubbed off on the films of others?

The Fabelman household comprises Sammy, his parents, and his three sisters, plus, more often than not, Uncle Bennie (Seth Rogen), who isn't an uncle at all. He is Burt's best friend; both of them are involved in electrical engineering, riding the swell of the nascent computing industry, though Burt is clearly the smarter of the two. His talent will pull the family (plus Bennie) to Phoenix, and then (minus Bennie) to California, where a plum job awaits at I.B.M. "The Fabelmans," you might say, is exploring and expanding on the double impulse that has continually tugged at Spielberg: the need for roots, versus the risks and the rapturous promise of uprooting. No other director has dramatized that quandary with greater concision. "Come," E.T.

said to Elliott, bidding him to board the spaceship. "Stay," Elliott replied. His mother, gazing on, sank to her knees.

With every change in location, Sammy ups his game. As a Boy Scout, in Arizona (now played by the engaging Gabriel LaBelle), he recruits his pals to be extras, or proud leads, in a Western and a war movie. In California, having completed his odyssey from coast to coast, he shoots a beach flick, for the class of '64, with ice cream standing in for seagull poop and roles for the jocks and the Jew-baiters who have made his final year so purgatorial. What gratifies Sammy is how unmanned the jocks are by viewing themselves writ large, and you can feel Spielberg insisting, via his hero, on moviemaking as a dual-purpose art: a technical adventure that throws an emotional punch. Puncturing the surface of the film with pins, for example, allows Sammy to add a momentary flare to gunshots, and it's only fitting that "The Fabelmans" should end with Sammy meeting the aged and cranky John Ford—you won't believe who plays him—and being told where the horizon should lie in the frame. Top or bottom, apparently. Anywhere in the middle, Ford says, is "boring as shit."

What sort of movie *is* this? Well, it's a bildungsroman, co-written by Spielberg and Tony Kushner, and peppered with incident rather than plotted. Characters get chapters to themselves. Check out Monica (Chloe East), the high-school belle, who comes on to Sammy by praying that Jesus descend unto him, or, back in Phoenix, Uncle Boris, who shows up at the door, uninvited, and preaches creative zeal. "We are junkies," he says to Sammy. "Art is our drug." Boris is played by Judd Hirsch, doing his kindly fiery-gruff shtick—the one he gave us in "Independence Day" (1996)—and, reportedly, earning a round of applause when "The Fabelmans" made its début, in Toronto. Yet the movie somehow slackens as it grows most broad, and I'm afraid I could have done without Boris altogether. His function is to spell out feelings that we sense far more keenly when they lie, unspoken, beneath the skin of the action.

That is why the core of the tale resides in an almost wordless scene. (Spirit Spielberg back to 1922, to the acme of silent Hollywood, and he would slot right in.) It seems cozy enough: a peaceful evening chez Fabelman. Mitzi, a fine pianist, who dreamed of a professional career, plays Bach. Burt, devout as ever, listens. Sammy, crouched over his editing machine, cuts and splices

footage from a family camping trip. Slowly, however, as he runs the film back and forth, he realizes that whenever his mother, out there in the woods, looked at Bennie—goofy, grinning Uncle Bennie, a pal to all—something flickered between them. For an instant, in the background, they held hands. Many children happen upon a flaw in their parents' marriage, but the happening, for Sammy, is the bitterest of blows; through the very medium that he worships, and hopes to master in his adult life, he catches sight of a truth he would rather not know. Film is the bringer of pain.

It's one of the most piercing passages in all of Spielberg—up there with the finale of "Empire of the Sun" (1987), when another boy, marooned by war, is reunited with his parents. His father fails to recognize him and walks on by; his mother sees him, changed utterly yet still her son, and gathers him in. How strange it is that the guy behind Indiana Jones and Jurassic Park should also have delved, fitfully but to a startling depth, into the Oedipal agon; if you want to anatomize Sammy Fabelman as a moody bourgeois Jewish Cold War Hamlet, whose mom nixes his dad for the sake of an "uncle," be my guest. You could go further, and argue that it's not actually Sammy but Mitzi, in Williams's near-to-the-brink performance, who takes possession of the new film. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" she asks her son. He, in turn, though he treasures his relatives, loves cinema "a little more," as Boris tells him. "The Fabelmans" may look nice 'n' easy as it swings along, with a pile of laughs to cushion the ride, and a nifty visual gag in the closing seconds, but take care. Here is a film that is touched with the madness of love.

If anything, the new film from Luca Guadagnino, "Bones and All," is even more nomadic than "The Fabelmans." We are in nineteen-eighties America, and the movie is eager to hustle through as many states as possible. Abbreviations flash onscreen: VA, MD, OH, IN. What, you ask, could drive such restlessness? A hunger for home, a fear of the law? Warm. The need for a square meal? Warmer.

On the lam are two young souls in love. They meet in a grocery store, where Lee (Timothée Chalamet) comes to the defense of a customer named Maren (Taylor Russell), who is being harassed. Before long, the pair of them hook up, shackled together by a common plight: they are both Eaters, who feast on human flesh. Every romance requires an obstacle—something to block a

couple's path to happiness and shear them off from regular society. Color, class, clan, creed, and sexual preference no longer cut it; cannibalism, however, is still off-limits, though the Cooking Channel is open to suggestions.

"Bones and All" is adapted by Guadagnino and David Kajganich from Camilla DeAngelis's novel of the same name, and the opening minutes are a model of narrative swiftness. Maren, who is still at school and lives with her father, Frank (André Holland), attends a sleepover at another girl's house, and bites off more than she can chew. Frank's reaction—"Not again"—tells us plenty, signals the need to take flight, and makes it inevitable that his daughter will go her own way.

Some Eaters can smell one another from afar, and Maren is soon sniffed out by Sully (Mark Rylance), who radiates pure threat. (He has a jaunty feather in his hat, which heightens the creepiness—a typical Guadagnino detail.) In a movie awash with blood, nothing is nastier than the spectacle of Sully waiting patiently for an old woman to die before he can tuck in. Sensing danger, Maren flees once more, and her loneliness finds no relief until she encounters Lee. The two of them are like a brace of beautiful scarecrows, and they grab at moments of joy as if snatching purses; look at Lee, breaking into an empty house and dancing wildly to Kiss. "Let's be *people*," Maren says, aching for normality, as they embrace in a tranquil landscape, but that glimpse of a happy ending is overtaken by events; like Gus Van Sant's "My Own Private Idaho" (1991), this is an anthem for doomed youth. The horror is genuinely visceral, yet the story, aided by impassioned work from Chalamet and Russell, pushes onward with a rough and desperate grace. "Bones and All" proves difficult to watch, but looking away is harder still. ♦

By Richard Brody

By Anthony Lane

By Isaac Butler

By Anthony Lane

The Theatre

- “My Broken Language” Reinvents the Memoir
- Audra McDonald Stars in “Ohio State Murders”

“My Broken Language” Reinvents the Memoir

Quiara Alegría Hudes adapts her autobiography for the stage, showing how the arts we attend to, and the people we know, make us who we are.

By Vinson Cunningham



One of my favorite moments in “My Broken Language”—written and directed by Quiara Alegría Hudes, at Signature Theatre’s Pershing Square Signature Center—comes when the femme performers of the play’s chorus walk in willowy patterns around the stage, each holding a book by a venerated writer. They lay the books on the ground and space them out precisely, forming a path. That image alone is enough to set forth the electric, often moving idea behind the play: that the arts we attend to—literary, religious, choreographic, conversational—are what, in the end, make us who we are and set us on our way. These books and their words are the substance of an unsettled soul, and have paved its road outward, into the world.

While the books are paraded, the performers call out the names of their authors: Allen Ginsberg, William Shakespeare, and Esmeralda Santiago are

mentioned. (I glimpsed one of my own long-loved books, Santiago's "When I Was Puerto Rican," just before it got placed on the ground.) "Where would I be without 'The House on Mango Street'?" somebody asks, referencing Sandra Cisneros's classic coming-of-age novel.

In Cisneros's recent poem "Tea Dance, Provincetown, 1982," published in this magazine, she describes growing up—her constant subject—on the raucous, energetic dance floors of that summer resort town:

> We were all on the run in '82.
> Jumping to Laura Branigan's "Gloria,"
> the summer's theme song.
> Beat thumping in our blood.
> Drinks sweeter than bodies
> convulsing on the floor.

Growing up, that poem posits, happens not alone but in concert, not as a private individual but as a being among beings in thrumming community, each person buffing a new facet of another's emerging identity. That's Hudes's ethos, too. Nobody's ever alone onstage.

"My Broken Language" is adapted from Hudes's memoir of the same name, published last year. (Hudes won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, in 2012, for her play "Water by the Spoonful," and wrote the book for Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical "In the Heights.") The play's text is, almost uniformly, a monologue with the texture of loving, lyrical prose. Five performers—Zabryna Guevara, Yani Marin, Samora la Perdida, Marilyn Torres, and the always exciting Daphne Rubin-Vega, a longtime presence in Hudes's work—take turns embodying the voice of the narrator, here called the Author. They move with a fluid grace through a green-tiled, houseplant-bedecked space, overhung with white ceiling fans, designed by Arnulfo Maldonado.

Hudes was raised in Philadelphia, surrounded by the Puerto Rican culture of her mother's family. While one actor pours forth Hudes's autobiographical material, often in the form of highly charged vignettes, describing social worlds and interior states in quick, compressed strokes, the others play members of her family: her mother or her coterie of revered older cousins.

The Author is obviously Hudes, but what makes this an original play and not a regurgitated version of her memoir is the implication, realized in these bodies, that an autobiography is common property, not a house behind a fence. Others' real lives, their true personalities—call them spirits—shiver through us, leaving their mark. They make us dance and sing and mimic their speech. Why else can our friends "do" us so well, developing physical and vocal impressions that flatter and mortify us with their emotional truth? Maybe that's why literature is so important to friendship: you read a book and so do I, and suddenly some region in both of our minds—a way of talking, thinking, feeling—becomes identical.

"My Broken Language" is structured in "movements," a nod to Hudes's musical background: she plays piano and studied music at Yale. Onstage with the actors, backing them up or marking space between their words, is a pianist, Ariacne Trujillo-Durand. The sections move forward in time, showing us new aspects of the Author's particular language. First comes a lovely portrait of Hudes's cousins, whom she calls the "Perez women," describing them—and, because their lives are all so powerfully intertwined, herself—in the kind of detail that comes only by way of prolonged proximity:

> Cuca, Tico, Flor, and Nuchi. Saying their names filled me with awe. They had babies and tats. I had blackheads and wedgies. They had curves and moves. I had puberty boobs called nipple-itis. They had acrylic tips in neon colors. I had piano lessons and nubby nails. They spoke Spanish like Greg Louganis dove—twisting, flipping, explosive—and laughed with the magnitude of a mushroom cloud.

There's a wistfulness in passages like this one, and throughout the play. It's the feeling of an artist looking back, surveying the fragmented landscape of her life, overlaying its confusions in retrospect, now armed with hard-won language. Hudes has a talent for describing the bodies of women. She writes with a rhythm and a tempo that match their curvature, and employs unlikely, often funny metaphors, ranging from pop culture to archeological and cosmic phenomena. Here she is, later on, now an M.F.A. student in playwriting at Brown, talking about the range of feminine figures she finds:

> After an El ride north through the desolate landscape, my matriarchs' bodies were natural wonders. Nuchi's eroded cheekbones were my Grand Canyon. Mom's thigh jiggles my Niagara Falls. The tattoo on Ginny's breast my Aurora Borealis. Facial moles like cacti in the sierra, front-tooth gaps like keyhole nebulae. The cellulite over their asses shone with a brook's babbling glimmer. The sag of each tit—big ones and small—like stalactites of epochal formation. Stalactitties!

That early vignette about Hudes's cousins ends with the Author getting her period, that most personal and bodily marker of a young woman's passage into a new movement of her life—an early digit in the "thousand natural shocks" that a girl's sensibilities become attuned to. Soon after that scene comes a different kind of rite: the Author witnesses her mother, an initiate into the Yoruba priesthood, being possessed by a spirit. The Author's voice, moving among bodies, is a kind of possession, too.

Her mother's religion, unsanctioned and all but unknown in the American mainstream, makes Hudes aware that she lives her life across spheres, across languages, across oceans. This might be the deep source of Hudes's facility with figurative language, fired by unexpected comparisons: all her life, the play seems to say, she has been drawing connections between seemingly unlike things. Her own unique English—musical, repetitive, intense—is a syncretistic stew. She realizes how her mother's ceremony and her cousins' dancing are really one thing:

> How propulsive and insistent their hips were, as if conducted by some magnificent force. Those gatherings were secular, this one was spiritual. And yet, a pulse is a pulse is a pulse. A drum is a drum is a drum. Yes, it was true, and here lay the evidence: dance and possession were dialects off the same mother tongue. I spoke neither. English, my best language, had no vocabulary for the possession nor the dance. And English was what I was made of. Would my words and my world ever align?

The answer, made evident in this play, is yes. "My Broken Language" is the product and the proof of a long process. Watching it and listening to it, my thoughts often strayed toward genre. After all, this is essentially a personal essay acted out. But the complications that so often come with personal

writing—self-obsession, claustrophobic enclosure, a certain stubborn myopia—are nowhere in evidence. Sure, there are places where the Author's voice goes mawkish and her prose crosses that often untraceable line between lyricism and purpleness. But probing, intelligent, earnest voices—the kind we hear when we close our eyes and think of life—sometimes tend that way, too.

As the actors tossed the Author's voice around, each excavating a new aspect of its appeal, I kept hoping that the production would hint at a way forward for personal essayists and other writers growing tired of their own interior monologues. Maybe they could put them up onstage and divide them among bodies and see what happens when they bounce off the walls. ♦

By David Remnick

By Joshua Rothman

By The New Yorker

By Lauren Collins

Audra McDonald Stars in “Ohio State Murders”

Adrienne Kennedy’s 1992 one-act play, which revisits the playwright’s time in college, has its Broadway début, directed by Kenny Leon.



In 1949, the writer Adrienne Kennedy, now ninety-one, enrolled at Ohio State University, where she became enamored with “Tess of the d’Urbervilles” but, as one of only a few Black female students, was stung by racism within the institution. She revisited this time in her 1992 one-act **“Ohio State Murders.”** The play’s Broadway première is now in previews, starring the theatrical luminary Audra McDonald (above). Kenny Leon’s production marks Kennedy’s Broadway début, and the first show at the newly renamed James Earl Jones Theatre.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

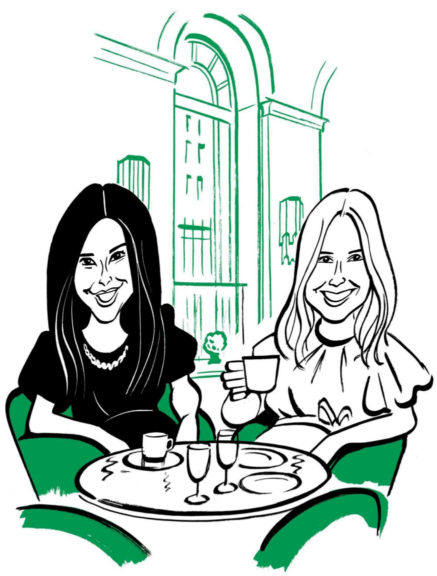
Wind On Capitol Hill

- [Vogue, But for Trumpers]

Vogue, But for Trumpers

The young founders of the Conservateur, an online magazine that aims to be a right-wing blend of Goop and Cosmopolitan, debrief the midterms' best looks and biggest disappointments.

By Antonia Hitchens



The day before the midterms, in Washington, Jayme Chandler Franklin and Isabelle Redfield, the founders of the Conservateur, an online style magazine that pitches itself as a Gen-Z right-wing alternative to *Vogue*—think Lara Trump in a flowing magenta gown as a cover girl—met at a café a few blocks from the White House to discuss the election. Hopes were high, especially for Republican women. Marjorie Taylor Greene was a lock for reëlection in Georgia. Sarah Huckabee Sanders was on the verge of becoming the first female governor of Arkansas. Sanders was also a possible headliner for the Conservateur's new #I'mWithHer campaign. "We're taking back that I'm-with-her thing from Hillary," Redfield said. They discussed other options: Karoline Leavitt, a Trump-backed House candidate in New Hampshire; Kari Lake, the Arizona gubernatorial contender; Jennifer-Ruth Green, a House challenger in Indiana. " 'Intersectionality' is a very Berkeley word, but Green happens to be a woman of color and also an Iraq veteran," Franklin said.

Redfield had on light-blue flare trousers; Franklin wore a knit dress and a cross necklace and ordered tea—she's nine months pregnant, and was off coffee and blue cheese. The pair has known each other since Catholic boarding school. They came up with the idea for the magazine in 2019, while sharing an apartment in D.C. Redfield was a student at Southern Methodist University on an internship at the White House. Franklin, who was attending Cal Berkeley, was an intern for the Wyoming senator John Barrasso. "I was looking around at Melania and Ivanka and Hope Hicks and all of these beautiful, empowered women, with amazing style. It was the best-dressed White House," Franklin said. "I would look at Web sites like Goop, and I thought, I could do this for conservatives."

They founded the magazine the next year, working remotely; they said they funded the launch themselves. Their columnists came from all over. "We have a girl who's a construction worker who writes for us, and then we have a girl who's a Houston Texans cheerleader," Franklin said. They saw a void to fill. "A lot of conservative media is very male-oriented—you know, camo and stuff like that."

The magazine mostly offers glossy profiles, life-style advice, and attitude-inflected dispatches from political events. Earlier this year, Redfield and Franklin had a meeting with Mike Pence to discuss pro-life branding. Recent articles include a sit-down with Rand Paul's wife, Kelley ("On Life and Love with Rand"). "The Lara Trump article came out the same time as an article about Jennifer Lawrence in *Vogue*, and the contrast was so stark," Franklin said. "Jennifer Lawrence talking about how she doesn't talk to her family anymore, because someone was conservative, and Tucker Carlson gives her P.T.S.D. And then Lara's article was about how she's raising her kids and why she didn't run for Senate or whatever."

It's not just political. "We definitely do own the libs and engage in meme culture," Redfield said. The fashion vertical has tips for shopping on the "#BidenBudget" ("With rampant inflation . . . now is not the time to spend $35 on mascara") and outfit ideas inspired by the many ink-black redactions in the Mar-a-Lago-raid affidavit ("Black and white stripes for this season's hottest style: corruption chic"). They're also selling a bright-pink cap that says "Make America Hot Again." (Lara Trump wears one.)

“It has a touch of *Cosmopolitan*, because we do a lot of dating stuff, but from a conservative Christian angle,” Franklin said. “Not like what we see in other places—cheat on your husband, have a threesome.”

She flipped through upcoming style content on her iPhone: “We have Marsha Blackburn next month, then I think we’re doing Kristi Noem.”

Redfield predicted that their vision was the future of conservatism. “It’s not your grandfather’s Grand Old Party anymore,” she said.

“This new America First movement is really inspiring for celebrity culture,” Franklin added. “What made the Squad so popular is that it was a bunch of young women that were saying their point of view. The new G.O.P. movement is finally catching up, this election.”

Two days later, after the election turned out to be surprisingly lacklustre (Lake’s race was still too close to call; Leavitt and Green both lost), the women nevertheless felt strangely validated. “It’s clear conservatives can’t solely rely on campaigning on common-sense values of faith, family, and freedom,” Franklin said. “We need to take back the culture first.”

Tuesday wasn’t entirely a wash. The women were encouraged by Anna Paulina Luna, who won a House seat in Florida. “Then she was on ‘Tucker’ wearing a really cute tweed blazer,” Franklin said. “Sometimes in her campaigning she would do camo. She can be versatile.” And after Ron DeSantis’s landslide win in Florida his wife, Casey, accompanied him onstage in a shiny gold dress. The Conservateur had already run an editorial about her, titled “Behind Every Great Man Is a Great Woman.” Franklin reported, “We’re in talks with her team about a shoot.” ♦

By Jane Mayer

By John Cassidy

By Rachel Aviv

By Andrew Marantz

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